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# Temporary higher education mobility and reimagination of rural areas: Insights into the motivations and expectations of students and hosts in the UNITA Rural Mobility Program in Italy and Spain

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## 1. Introduction

The complexity and transformation of the rural world are generally related to the heterogeneity of endogenous “locally fixed” resources and the highly diversified ways in which they are used and combined (Ventura et al., 2008). However, the creation of social environments capable of supporting links with the “outside” - i.e., connections to and access to external and mobile knowledge and human resources for learning and innovation - is seen as one of the most urgent and unavoidable conditions for activating sustainable rural development pathways (Li et al., 2019) and for reimagining rural futures beyond “traditional” epitomes of nature in a pure state or peripheral remoteness (Friedli, 2020).

Inbound and outbound mobility flows have always been fundamental for rural societies and are becoming increasingly significant for rural areas' future (Milbourne, 2007; Bell and Osti, 2010). On the one hand, with regard to outbound movements, for example in Alpine areas (see Viazzo, 1989) and the Pyrenees (Cuesta, 1998), temporary mobility flows in the form of seasonal emigration have traditionally represented a strategy for optimizing the livelihoods of local populations and sustaining farming- and craft-based economies. Today, partly thanks to the growing prevalence of commuting, mobility flows strongly influence rural economic organization (Osti, 2010; López-Iglesias et al., 2018). On the other hand, contemporary inbound movements characterizing highly differentiated rural mobilities frequently fall under the broader

neo-rural phenomenon, also referred to as the back-to-the-land or countryside movement. For some authors, this phenomenon originated in countercultural movements in Europe and North America in the second half of the twentieth century (Vizuet et al., 2024) and has evolved into a variety of diverse phenomena, ranging from amenity migration (Cadieux and Hurley, 2011) to repeasantisation (Van der Ploeg, 2018). Nonetheless, despite increasing and diversified inbound movements towards rural areas, one of the major challenges still faced by most rural communities is the outmigration of young people, who leave their territories to access job opportunities and higher education elsewhere (McLaughlin et al., 2014; Sharp et al., 2020).

In an effort to limit the impact of this chronic problem, the temporary relocation of students to these regions - as part of new mobility flows towards rural areas - is increasingly being viewed as an opportunity to help preserve rural social capital. Various institutionally led programs promoting rural mobility within higher education have recently been implemented across Europe. Spain has been a pioneer in this field, with the launch - by the University of Zaragoza in cooperation with the Provincial Council of Zaragoza - of programs such as *Desafío*<sup>1</sup> in 2018, and *Arraigo*<sup>2</sup> in 2020 (UNIZAR, 2024), both components of the broader framework *Erasmus Rural*. Following this, in 2021, the UNITA Montium Alliance<sup>3</sup> (hereinafter UNITA) launched the Rural Mobility Program (RMP). It offers internship opportunities to students at the Bachelor's, Master's, and doctoral levels in institutions or companies based in rural areas of France, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Switzerland in

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<sup>1</sup> Desafío involves students (from all Aragon) in their final university courses who wish to explore rural villages for future job purposes with an internship in local enterprises, organizations and institutions.

<sup>2</sup> Arraigo involves graduates from the University of Zaragoza (in the previous six academic years) with a connection to the territory (e.g., residence) where they will carry out their internships.

<sup>3</sup> UNITA Universitas Montium is an alliance of 12 universities based in seven countries in Western and Central-Eastern Europe. Partners are located in rural, mountain, and cross-border regions.

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cooperation with local universities (UNITA, 2026b). Its general objective is to create new synergies in education, research, and entrepreneurship, and to generate a net positive impact on rural areas across the aforementioned countries.

Recent studies (see García-Casarejos and Sáez-Pérez, 2020; Seddaiu, 2022; Álvarez, 2024) show that promoting such programs as innovative learning strategies can be a viable way to contribute to 'the vibrancy of sparsely populated areas by renewing their human capital, removing stereotypes and prejudices about provincial life, and reinforcing their social and relational capital' (García-Casarejos and Sáez-Pérez, 2020, p. 17). Notwithstanding the expected potential of these programs as an integrated component of broader local plans for territorial development, research on this type of mobility remains limited. Consequently, to date, the understanding of the drivers fueling emerging interest in student mobility towards rural areas remains underexplored. Given that young adults increasingly move to or are drawn to rural contexts for a variety of reasons (Hofstede et al., 2023), a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics within the framework of higher education mobility initiatives may contribute to the consolidation and enhancement of the quality and attractiveness of programmes and host contexts, as well as to the local-level impact of this form of exchange. Similarly, understanding the expectations and motivations of institutions and private entities based in rural areas to host students through internships or similar initiatives can help clarify their role as connectors between the "outside" and the "inside", between the national and international dimensions of RMPs and the local scale at which they are implemented. It is precisely through the host actors' filtering action that the general objectives of such programs may be reassessed and adapted, in light of their local networks and activities, thereby embedding rural mobility initiatives into local strategies already underway.

Accordingly, this article aims to contribute to filling the aforementioned research gap by exploring the relationship between the motivations and expectations of RMP hosting organizations and participating students, and the potential for generating new ways of imagining rural areas and rurality. From this perspective, the article develops a qualitative analysis of these motivations and expectations, considering them as foundational premises for understanding how innovative mobility strategies in higher education can help challenge consolidated - and at times misleading - imaginaries of rural places, often essentialised as socially cohesive, homogenized as static, or framed as irreversibly in decline. The data discussed are drawn from a case study of the UNITA RMP, focusing on two regions whose rural areas involved in the program have experienced significant population decline over recent decades: the provinces of Zaragoza and Teruel (Aragon, Spain), and the mountain areas of the provinces of Biella and Cuneo (Piedmont, Italy). Although imaginaries are not the direct object of analysis, a focus on motivations and expectations enables the identification of emerging multiple processes of reimagining rural areas (Halfacree, 2006; Woods, 2011). This plurality, in turn, facilitates an understanding of how these areas are perceived and interpreted in diverse and dynamic ways.

Briefly, the article is structured as follows: Section 2 develops the theoretical framework on rural imaginaries and mobility, introducing temporary higher education mobility as a driver of rural space reimagination; Sections 3 and 4 present the research methods and main findings; Section 5 discusses the results in light of the framework and project objectives by presenting the RMP as a productive space of hybridization between internal and external rural imaginaries, capable of challenging stereotypes and envisioning complex development trajectories, also through a continuous osmosis between rural and urban areas; Section 6 reflects on the study's innovation and focus, outlining directions for future research.

## 2. Temporary mobilities and higher education in rural areas: For a reconfiguration of rural imaginaries

Imaginaries are systems of ideas, norms, and values that individuals

and groups use to conceptualize, represent, and contribute to the structuring or restructuring of objects or places (Raffestin, 2005; Goszczyński and Wróblewski, 2020). In his account of the totality of rural space, Halfacree (2006), drawing on Lefebvre's theory of *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre, 1991), emphasizes the complementarity between (perceived) rural materiality (or locality), representations of (conceived) rural space, and (lived) everyday rural practices conditioned by multiple symbols, cultural meanings, and images of the rural. From a similar constructivist perspective, Woods (2011, p. 16) states that "the 'rural' is first imagined, then represented, then it takes on material form as places, landscapes and ways of life are shaped to conform to the expectations that the idea of the 'rural' embodied areas have material and expressive components". In this framework, imaginaries are not only central to the production of space, both materially and symbolically, but also shape and condition the motivations for mobility to, between, and from rural areas.

Rural imaginaries have often portrayed rural areas as subaltern spaces to be domesticated, protected, exploited, or modernized (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), as well as idyllic settings of pastoral myths or lost paradises (Van der Ploeg, 1997; Shucksmith, 2018), generally conceived as predominantly agrarian and wild (Sutherland, 2022). However, rural territories are undergoing profound transformations driven by several converging forces. The shift towards post-Fordist and post-productivist models, the rise of new social and spatial inequalities, and mounting environmental crises are reshaping the countryside, alongside new patterns of mobility and migration. At the same time, as highlighted by the European Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (EC, 2024), rural areas are being redefined by emerging social demands, opportunities linked to the green economy, technological advancements, and a growing recognition of agriculture's multifunctionality. Together, these dynamics are enhancing the diversification of both the image and the reality of rural territories into multiple, heterogeneous forms (Goodman, 2004; Halfacree, 2006; Mastrangelo et al., 2023).

Regardless of pervasive imaginaries of rural timelessness, rural change has always been a key driver of broader societal transformations, although it now appears more intensified (Halfacree, 2006), at times more evident, and increasingly characterized by interconnections and interdependencies between societal systems (Ventura et al., 2008; Uleri et al., 2025).

Today, more than ever, rural areas are economically, politically, and culturally produced and reproduced through multiple mobilities of different people and social groups, as well as through capital, objects, signs, knowledge, and diverse imaginaries (Urry, 2007). Mobility programs can contribute to the production of new orientations and perceptions, fostering the emergence of new spatial imaginaries. However, most of the scholarly debate on rural mobility focuses on analyses of outmigration and immigration, based on population statistics and censuses that regularly monitor permanent movements and individuals' usual places of residence. Consequently, issues of outmigration and counter-urbanization tend to dominate rural development discourses on mobility, obscuring consideration of the more fluid movements of a broader and growing range of actors who move through rural areas for short periods of time (Pitkänen et al., 2017; Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014; Dillel et al., 2024). In this regard, Milbourne (2007) suggests that the temporal dimension of movement is a crucial element that warrants attention in contemporary studies of rural population change. Focusing on this dimension helps conceptualize rural places as meeting points for people at different stages of complex journeys through time and space, thereby addressing not only the categorization of the types of mobility traversing rural areas, but also highlighting the localized role that short-term movements can play. Through continuous processes of exchange, these movements can stimulate the unmaking, making, and remaking of territories, also following trajectories of "temporary" counter-urbanization as described by Halfacree (2012). A specific research focus on temporary mobilities may help overcome the dichotomy between long-term and new residents of rural localities, while

also drawing broader attention to how the interactions and coexistence of different populations may support, constrain, and reshape rural development strategies and representations in shrinking rural areas (Nefedova, 2015).

Conceptualizations from rural sociology and human geography concerning temporary rural mobilities remain blurred. Some studies have attempted to define temporary mobilities (Bell and Ward, 2000), while others have focused on the characteristics and motivations underlying specific types of mobility, often related to tourism and work (Carson and Carson, 2018; Carson et al., 2018). Others have proposed frameworks that conceptualize mobility as a continuum of movements differing in their spatial and temporal dimensions, encompassing both temporary and more permanent forms (Cohen et al., 2013). Part of this scholarship has also emphasized how temporary population mobilities involving non-resident labour - including long-distance commuters, refugees (Schäfer and Henn, 2023), skilled workers on short-term contracts, and “escalator migrants” (Thissen et al., 2010; Kazakis and Faggian, 2017) - can significantly foster the creation of new development opportunities both within and beyond traditional rural industries.

Temporary mobilities are now crossing rural areas also as destination spaces for the acquisition of knowledge and soft skills, including at the academic level, as part of decentralized configurations of the university system (Cadavieco and Prado, 2013). Examples of rural mobility initiatives in higher education generally adopt experiential and project-based learning approaches to reconnect learning processes with students’ engagement in practical life situations and territorial projects (Cazorla-Montero et al., 2019). Such interactions can give rise to new and dynamic *co-learning environments*, aiming to capitalize on prior learning, imaginaries, and experiences, while also fostering new visions among all actors involved and opening up space for greater attention to specific social groups and places not typically included within formal higher education provision (Le Heron et al., 2013).

In this framework, this contribution examines temporary mobilities through a relational lens of rural space and rurality (Halfacree, 2006; Woods, 2010; Woods et al., 2021), arguing that the temporary connections established between host territories and students participating in the RMP constitute a potentially generative moment, marked by the encounter, and at times contestation, of imaginaries concerning territory, its future, and the very concept of rurality. At its core, understanding the expectations and motivations underlying this type of mobility, and revealing the nuanced imaginaries potentially associated with them, requires attentiveness to how rural imaginaries may link past and future temporalities, enable or constrain actions and practices in space, and normalize or challenge ways of thinking about possible rural futures and higher education scenarios. Imaginaries can form the backbone of coordinated actions within mobile population groups, policy networks, or scientific and techno-epistemic systems. They may influence local educational planning measures, key policy decisions, or ‘justify new investments [ ... ], promote certain development pathways, and even justify the inclusion or exclusion of certain actors in the decision-making process’ (Delina, 2018, p. 50).

### 3. The UNITA rural mobility program in Piedmont and Aragon: Materials and methods

The UNITA consortium - with its network of 12 universities - is an

alliance established as a long-term cooperation project within the framework of the Erasmus + program, with the aim of fostering innovation and collaboration among academic institutions situated in regions facing similar challenges and shaped by core-periphery dynamics.<sup>4</sup>

The RMP is based on the participation of students in internships and training experiences hosted by public institutions, civil society organizations, or private companies located in rural areas. The stated aims of these initiatives are ‘to develop their professional and soft skills and contribute to the revitalization of rural and mountain areas in a destination managed by another UNITA university’ (UNITA, 2026b). The internships last approximately one month and provide financial support to students. To foster cultural exchange, students are encouraged, but not required, to apply to placements in other UNITA partner countries. According to official data from the UNITA-Office-UNITO (2024), across the first three calls of the program (2021, 2022, and 2023), a total of 313 internships were offered in the rural regions surrounding six universities within the UNITA consortium.

In order to understand the expectations and motivations underlying students’ and hosts’ decisions to participate in the RMP, an initial desk analysis was conducted to map and profile all internships activated in Italy and Spain, with a specific focus on the regions of Piedmont and Aragon between 2021 and 2023 by the two local universities, the University of Turin (UNITO) and the University of Zaragoza (UNIZAR). Between 2021 and 2023, a total of 142 RMP internships were activated (100 in Aragon and 42 in Piedmont) (UNITA-Office-UNITO, 2024). For the Spanish case, we focused our analysis on (i) seven host organizations in Aragon, located in the provinces of Zaragoza (i.e. Belchite, Daroca, Tobed, and Torralba de Ribota) and Teruel (i.e. Calamocha and Castellote). These were selected from among the municipalities involved in the RMP with the lowest population levels and, given their geographical distribution, allowed us to cover all sites within a reasonable and manageable timeframe, making fieldwork practically feasible. For the Italian case, we selected (ii) three host organizations in Piedmont, located in the province of Cuneo (Ostana and Paraloup, a village in the municipality of Rittana) and the province of Biella (Sordevolo). These represent all the entities involved as hosts in the RMP from the launch of the program up to August 2023 (Fig. 1; Table 2)

The data show that all selected municipalities experienced a marked decline in population (Table 1). On average, between 1961 and 2020, the population decreased by 63% in Piedmont, with a peak decline of -80.78% in Rittana, and by 52% in Aragon, with a peak decline of -71.35% in Castellote.

All host organizations in Piedmont and Aragon were interviewed between May and June 2023 using semi-structured interviews, with questions organized into six main thematic sections: (i) host organization profile; (ii) local organization of the RMP (e.g. internal motivations, funding sources, annual RMP offers); (iii) local networking supporting RMP initiatives; (iv) expectations; (v) RMP and territory (e.g. strengths and weaknesses of the RMP at both the consortium and territorial levels); and (vi) future steps in the RMP and potential scaling-up actions.

For the student group, data were collected exclusively in the Italian case. An initial ex ante online survey was administered to incoming students prior to their arrival in the host municipalities (6 respondents out of 12), in order to gather information on motivations and expectations regarding the RMP and the specific territorial context.

<sup>4</sup> The 12 universities involved as UNITA partners are: Universidade da Beira Interior (Portugal), Instituto Politécnico da Guarda (Portugal), Universidad Pública de Navarra (Spain), Universidad de Zaragoza (Spain), Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour (France), Université Savoie Mont Blanc (France), Università degli Studi di Torino (Italy), Università degli Studi di Brescia (Italy), Universitatea de Vest din Timisoara (Romania), Universitatea Transilvania din Braşov (Romania), Haute Ecole Spécialisée de Suisse Occidentale (Switzerland), Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University (Ukraine) (UNITA, 2026a).

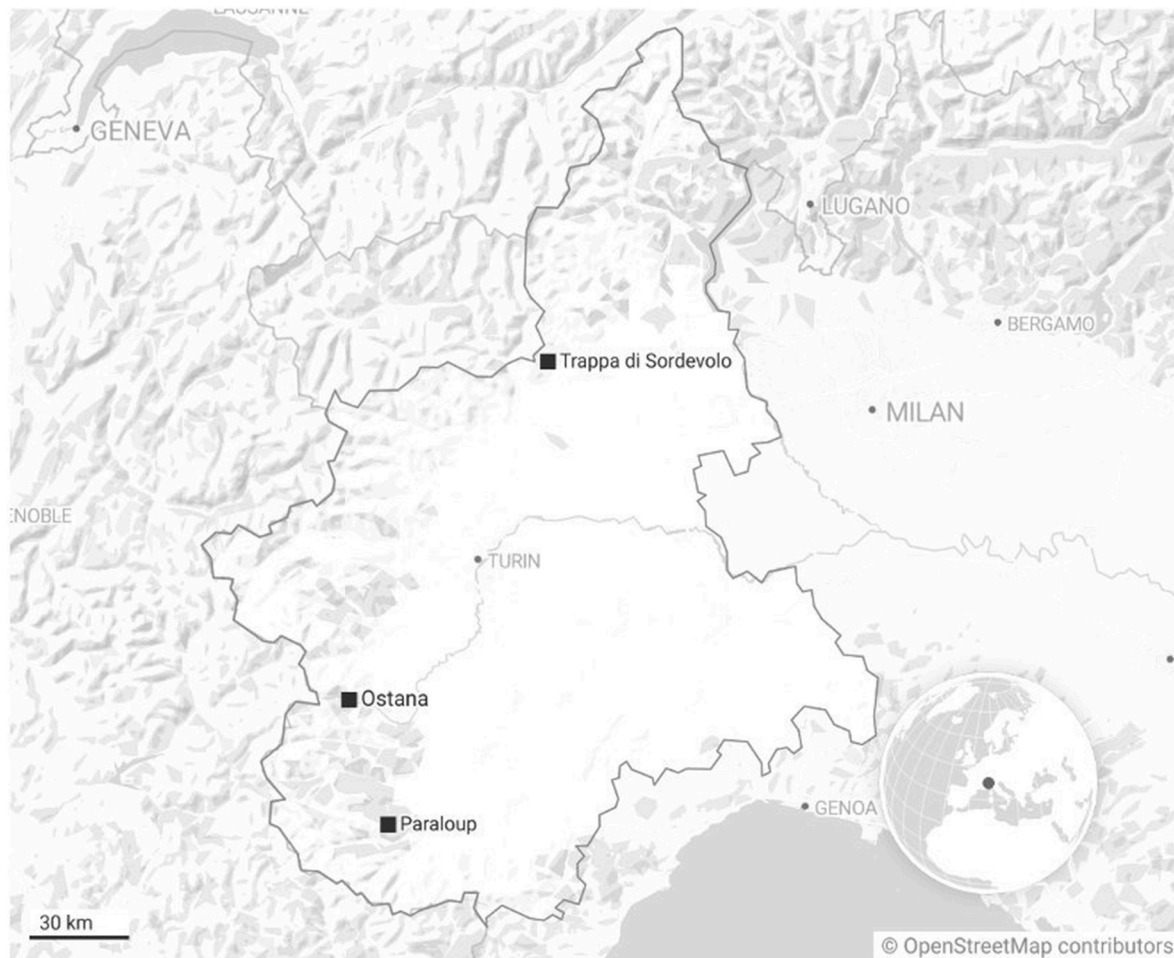


Fig. 1. Geographical distribution of selected RMP internships in Italy and Spain. Source: Authors' elaboration

Subsequently, at the end of the experience, a focus group was conducted in each location (Ostana, Paraloup, and Sordevolo) to collect parallel ex post data, aimed at confirming, revising, or complementing the initial perspectives. A total of 11 students participated in the activities (3 out of 4 in Ostana, 4 in Paraloup, and 4 in Sordevolo) (Table 3). It should be noted that student data were collected exclusively in the Italian context due to practical constraints, such as limited timeframes and funding limitations. This does not undermine the overall coherence of the research, as the two national cases were not intended to constitute a strictly comparative analysis. Rather, findings from each context are treated as context-sensitive insights and are used accordingly to inform the discussion of the data and the broader reflections developed throughout the article.

Data and findings were analyzed following the Thematic Analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2012; Terry et al., 2017), a qualitative method aimed at identifying, analyzing, and interpreting recurring patterns (themes) within the data. This approach allowed for a systematic exploration of motivations and expectations connected to the following dimensions:

(At the host level)

- perceptions of the general objectives of the RMP;
- processes for accessing the RMP, including the formal RMP system (e.g. application and institutional procedures) and extra-RMP networking;
- links between the RMP and the host organization's mission;

- links between the RMP and the implementation of other local development initiatives, as well as participation in other mobility programs and/or higher education projects.

(At the student level)

- perceptions of the general objectives of the RMP;
- educational demand and its diversification;
- prior imaginaries of rurality and expectations regarding the RMP host location;
- links between mobility opportunities and students' fields of study;
- links between the UNITA RMP and other forms of individual mobility.

Accordingly, in light of the above-mentioned aspects, the following section examines the specific features of motivations and expectations in the two RMP contexts, seeking to understand how they shape interactions between students and hosts and, more broadly, influence their perceptions and practices. As previously noted, understanding the motivations and expectations of individuals involved in such mobility programs requires attention to how rural imaginaries connect past and future temporalities. Specifically, students' and hosts' motivations and expectations constitute the conceptual framework emerging from the field, enabling us to capture diverse imaginaries across different spaces and actors, and to explore how these shape perspectives on potential rural futures and higher education configurations.



Fig. 1. (continued).

**Table 1**  
Demographic trends in host municipalities.

HOST MUNICIPALITIES	ELEVATION (m.a.s.l.)	ADMINISTRATIVE LOCALIZATION (levels: eg. region, province; district, county)	POPULATION (Tot. residents) 1961	POPULATION (Tot. current residents) 2020	POPULATION VARIATION (%)	DENSITY (Inhabitants/km <sup>2</sup> )
<b>ITALY</b>						
Ostana	1250	Piedmont, Cuneo province	367	89	-75,75	6,31
Paraloup (hamlet of Rittana) see below	1360	Piedmont, Cuneo province				
Rittana		Piedmont, Cuneo province	567	109	-80,78	9,6
Sordevolo	627	Piedmont, Biella province	1990	1340	-32,66	97,66
<b>SPAIN</b>						
Belchite	440	Aragona, Zaragoza	2650	1530	-42,26	5,58
Daroca	782	Aragona, Zaragoza	3380	1970	-41,72	37,75
Tobed	638	Aragona, Zaragoza	711	230	-67,65	7,1
Torralba de Ribota	625	Aragona, Zaragoza	460	169	-61,09	5,2
Calamocha	894	Aragona, Teruel	6700	4430	-33,88	13,99
Castellote	804	Aragona, Teruel	2360	676	-71,35	2,87

Source: own elaboration on Rural Observatory data.

**4. Results: RMP motivations and expectations, an interplay for reimagined ruralities**

**4.1. Hosts: From learning to co-learning expectations and the centrality of non-economic motivations**

The fieldwork reveals that most host organizations access the RMP through established collaborations with local universities, often built around the joint implementation of previous initiatives, projects, and institutional programs. The consolidation of cooperation with universities constitutes the backbone of hosts' motivations and expectations,

grounded in long-standing relationships of trust that are often embedded within dense networks of strong ties:

*'[...] [For us] the beginning of the [RMP] program was Desafío, [...] a program promoted by the Chair of Depopulation and Creativity at UNIZAR. [...] We offered four internships in 2019 and four in 2020 [under the Desafío program], and then we received the UNITA call. What we did was mix them' (Int. 2 – Spain, representative of an RMP host organization and local RMP tutor, Tobed).*

*'[The connection with the university] is a network that works. [...] They usually call us for projects that require a long design incubation [...]*

**Table 2**  
RMP hosts.

HOST LOCALIZATION	HOST TYPOLOGY	REQUIRED/EXPECTED STUDENTS' PROFILE (field of study)	Year of participation in the RMP
Ostana	Community Cooperative	● Education and Pedagogy	2021
		● Archival Research/Cultural Animation	2022
Paraloup	Social Enterprise	● Communication/Heritage Marketing and Green Marketing	2022
		● Rural Economy/Landscape Management/Sustainable Tourism	2023
Sordevolo (with daily movements in the Biella Province)	Cooperative	● Territorial Planning	2022
		● Agronomy	2023
Belchite	Local Action Group (LAG)	● Business management/Service Design/Communication and Marketing	2022
		● Documentation sciences	2023
Daroca	Municipal Office for Labor and Local Development	● Social Design/Anthropology/Territorial animation/	2021
		● Territorial planning and project management	2022
Daroca	Cultural Foundation	● Territorial planning	2021
		● Cultural project management	2022
Tobed	Cultural Association	● Cultural project management	2021
		● Territorial and cultural animation/Social Design	2022
Torralba de Ribota	Cultural Association	● Cultural communication	2022
		● Territorial planning and project management	2023
Calamocha	Local Action Group (LAG)	● Education/Pedagogy	2022
		● Education/Pedagogy	2022
Castellote	Primary school - Colegio Rural Agrupado	● Education/Pedagogy	2022

**Table 3**  
Profile of students involved in the focus groups.

Destination	Sending University	Home country	Age
Ostana	UNITO - Italy	Iran	50
	UNITO - Italy	Italy	23
	UPPA - France	France	22
Paraloup	UNITO - Italy	Italy	28
	UNITO - Italy	Italy	26
	UNIZAR - Spain	Mexico	23
	UPPA - France	Haiti	21
Sordevolo	UNITO - Italy	Azerbaijan	24
	UNITO - Italy	Russia	24
	UNIZAR - Spain	Spain	22
	UPPA - France	Spain	24

*but have an interesting vision'* (Int. 1 – Italy, representative of an RMP host organization and local RMP tutor, province of Biella).

The research shows how hosts' expectations evolve over time. During the first year of participation in the RMP, these expectations were primarily focused on initiating a learning process that could effectively

contribute to students' career development:

*'It [the RMP] was something that seemed interesting to me; [the expectation] relates to simply having a person accompany me in the work, going as slowly as needed to learn how the Ayuntamiento [the municipal system] works'* (Int. 4 – Spain, representative of an RMP host organization and local RMP tutor, Daroca).

*'[What were your expectations?] We had no idea. For us, the concern was, "Will we be able to give them real substance to learn? Will we be able to find territorial actors who have something to transmit?" [...] We had to test ourselves a bit on this. We had no expectations. The possibility of releasing that energy was our goal, and we can say that we succeeded'* (Int. 1 – Italy).

Complementarily, in the second and third years of participation, hosts' expectations increasingly involved fostering a stronger connection between the program and the local territory, with the aim of shifting from a unidirectional model of learning to a reciprocal process of co-learning. This shift entails directing the educational dimensions of the RMP not only towards students, but also towards the host context:

*'This year, the expectations are different because we need to work more with local stakeholders than last year [...] to work with those who have expertise and want to make it available. That means that we want to make the RMP interesting for those who host it [for the territory]. Last year, it [the expected objective] was "trying to get these students to do something"; this year, it is "working together with the students to make things work better"'* (Int. 1 – Italy).

Considering this relational structure as an essential pillar for the implementation of the program, and focusing on hosts' motivations, it is important to note that host organizations do not receive direct remuneration for their involvement. They are only reimbursed for participants' food and accommodation when they are directly responsible for providing these services, with costs covered by UNITA. To date, most UNITA resources have been allocated to funding students' monthly allowances; as a result, in some cases, universities support host activities through additional internal funding schemes or external financial contributions. However, these forms of support are sporadic, limited in scale, and often insufficient to cover the level of effort and work required from RMP host organizations.

In Spain, additional support for host activities is more commonly secured by integrating the RMP with other structured and consolidated national or provincial initiatives promoting different forms of rural mobility for education, such as *Erasmus Rural DPZ-UNIZAR* (Province of Zaragoza in collaboration with the University of Zaragoza).

In Italy, by contrast, this scenario appears more precarious, requiring specific requests and negotiations on a yearly basis. This suggests that such initiatives are not institutionalized within a broader strategic framework that recognizes the potential of this type of mobility. This risks to discourage long-term participation and limit the overall impact of such projects:

*'[If there is no funding], we would have to ask ourselves [as RMP hosts] whether the initiative can be repeated, because we, let's say, put our heart and our vision into it, but we cannot continue for many years by investing only our own resources. [...] The biggest limitation for us is the budget. [...] You have very skilled people coming here [through the RMP]'* (Int. 2 – Italy, representative of an RMP host organization and local RMP tutor, Paraloup).

However, at present, it can be argued that although the need for economic compensation is recognized by hosts as a key factor influencing the long-term sustainability of the RMP and their continued participation, economic motivations played only a limited role in shaping their willingness to engage in this initial phase. This can be explained by the fact that host organizations widely acknowledge the importance of processes of exchange and hybridization between

different knowledge systems for the future development of their territories. The co-development of creative and novel solutions to challenges related to rural economies and organizational practices, drawing on the visions and experiences of “outsiders”, as well as the transfer and circulation of knowledge, thus emerge as central drivers of host motivation:

*‘In rural areas, we face difficulties in attracting new [non-resident] people; we need these young people who come here. There is a shortage of qualified and university-educated individuals. We need a different vision [...] and we need to become familiar with it’* (Int. 1 – Spain, representative of an RMP host organization and local RMP tutor, Belchite).

*‘The fact that someone new arrives here with the desire to participate and help—especially considering the shortage of human resources [in rural schools] - give us a hand. In this way, I can say we can identify similarities and differences between our educational systems, discuss how different school systems function, or why they may not work, and also recognize aspects we could not have previously imagined [...]. That is the power of comparison’* (Int. 7 – Spain, representative of an RMP host organization and local RMP tutor, Castellote).

*‘[When I received the proposal to participate in the RMP], I accepted immediately [...]. This project has enormous potential for areas like ours and is of great importance, and I regret that institutions are not fully aware of its significance in terms of innovation. [...] I believe that the presence of skilled young people from different European contexts can truly make a significant contribution to these rural areas’* (Int. 3 – Italy, representative of an RMP host organization and local RMP tutor, Ostana)

At the same time, the opportunity to host individuals who do not live in rural areas is perceived as a means to challenge negative or misleading imaginaries associated with living in these contexts. The circulation of knowledge, together with the assemblage of different knowledge systems and the interaction between international rural and urban groups, further motivates host organizations to participate in the RMP:

*‘We need more people to perceive the benefits of life in a rural village’* (Int. 1 – Spain).

*‘Having the opportunity to immerse yourself in rural life [original: ‘poderte meter en la vida rural’] [...] is a way of getting to know rural places without idealizing them’* (Int. 3 – Spain, representative of an RMP host organization and local RMP tutor, Torralba de Ribota).

Hosts also recognize that the mobility initiative, with its both formal and informal opportunities linked to the proposed training activities that enable students to interact with local residents, can help stimulate local communities by challenging entrenched and widely shared internal imaginaries of inevitable rural decline:

*‘[The RMP] brings a positive vision [...] something that changes our ‘mindset’ [...] we are often very focused on the local [internal visions]. [...] Sometimes it is easier for young people to appreciate and valorize what rural communities offer’* (Int. 4 – Belchite, Spain).

*‘People from other countries who tell you about other worlds [...] for me this is positive [...] local people see movement, it helps them. [...] It can spark curiosity [...] cultural exchange, I think it’s healthy [for the place] [...]. Movement generates movement’* (Int. 8 – Torralba de Ribota, Spain).

Moreover, the relevance of the RMP in fostering a shift in the composition of alternative imaginaries is perceived by host actors not only in relation to external populations (e.g. international students) and local residents, but also in relation to local governance structures, as an opportunity to raise awareness of the need for new place-based policy visions: *‘Projects like UNITA [...] can act as triggers for creating networks*

*that engage in advocacy’* (Int. 2 – Italy). Accordingly, this process relies on the interconnection of multiple project trajectories that align with hosts’ efforts to promote coherent, place-based development strategies: *‘It is also thanks to this opportunity [provided by the UNITA] project that we find ourselves carrying out strategic planning actions for an entire territory, in connection with other funding bodies, local actors, and all those who may benefit from it’* (Int. 1 – Italy).

On this matter, considering the fragile long-term economic sustainability of the RMP in the Italian case, when the host (Int. 1 – Italy) was asked whether their involvement in the program could be categorized as “voluntaristic”, they responded that - given their profile as a cooperative enterprise - it could instead be understood as an *‘entrepreneurial investment’*. This perspective emphasizes the program’s role in enabling the creation and strengthening of strategic territorial linkages, as well as in defining new collaborative arenas for territorial project design and planning, in line with the cooperative/host’s objectives [fieldnote, May 2023 – telephone conversation for interview organization]. This finding confirms the centrality of local actions that do not rely on direct economic incentives from the RMP, as participation may simultaneously foster networking opportunities and support open environments for collaborative innovation. In this sense, the RMP can contribute, for example, in reducing the costs associated with project development or new service design, thereby facilitating the implementation of local innovation in connection with other initiatives (Esparcia, 2014), or as part of broader processes of national and regional eco-social development (Ward and Brown, 2009).

Last but not least, value-driven motivations also emerge, particularly in relation to the preservation and revitalization of the active historical memory of these places through interaction with younger generations:

*‘Everything that happened during the [civil] war period [...] is very important [...] these are wounds. What was experienced as a consequence of the emigration wave is also very important [for discussion], a profound wound that is rarely talked about. [...] This was a compulsory process: people did not want to leave; they left because it seemed that [leaving rural areas] was what had to be done. What if they had had the chance to choose? [...] It seemed that anyone who stayed was a coward [...]’* (Int. 3 – Spain).

This reflection points to a form of “constructive historical memory”, understood as a ‘matter of narration and ongoing communication that [...] allows people to position themselves and define who they are’ across time’ (Van Beek and Lategan, 2005, p. 352), through processes of social construction involving selective remembering, forgetting, and the multiple assemblage of internal and external imaginaries. Viewing memory as a key element in motivating and guiding host actors’ actions highlights its role in mobilizing political and symbolic resources, which can be instrumental in ‘processing the trauma of past development projects’ while articulating alternative futures (Feola et al., 2023, p. 3), through the redefinition and reprioritization of the expressive components of rural places (Woods, 2015).

To sum up, host actors appear to be primarily driven by four highly interrelated typologies of motivation (Fig. 2).

1. *Expressive motivations*: these refer to the personal and often intimate willingness of the host organization’s representative or core group to “bring their work and actions outward while remaining rooted in the territory”. This entails opening up to external actors (from different contexts, e.g. national and international) by sharing what is happening locally, what they do as a non-profit organization, institution, or enterprise, as well as expressing the challenges they face in their daily work and their needs, alongside the satisfaction and personal fulfilment derived from working and living in these contexts.
2. *Knowledge-sharing motivations*: these stem from the central role of exchanging know-how, skills, and diverse, stratified knowledge systems within processes of mutual learning aimed at addressing the

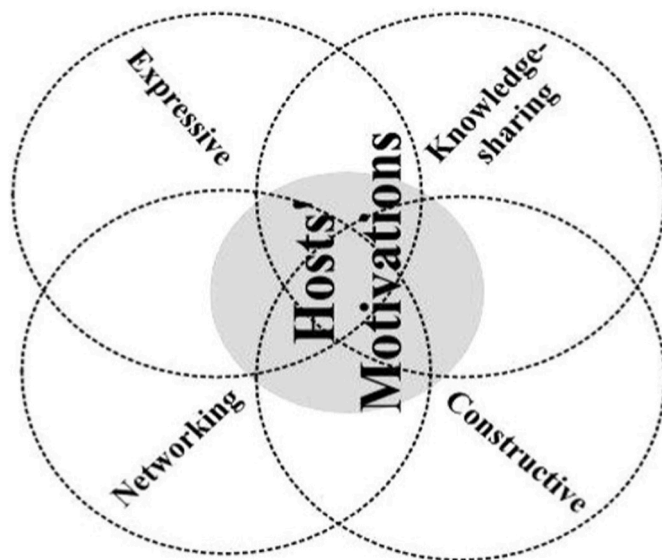


Fig. 2. Hosts' motivations.  
Source: Authors' elaboration

issues and responsibilities characterizing the host organization's daily activities, while also enhancing students' professional development. These motivations are closely linked to expressive ones, as they complement a linear mode of communication (“this is what we do”) with a more interactive and reciprocal approach (“what can we do together?” and “what can we learn from each other?”).

3. *Networking motivations*: these refer to the willingness to establish local and extra-local networks to support and promote development initiatives aligned with the host organization's mission and vision. They are primarily non-economic in nature, as they aim to foster coordinated action to address financial constraints and institutional gaps through multi-actor and multi-sector cooperation (e.g. universities, the non-profit sector, and the entrepreneurial sector). Nonetheless, such motivations may also encompass economic objectives (e.g. access to additional funding), which can contribute to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the initiative.
4. *Constructive motivations*: these are value-driven motivations related to the active and participatory construction and reshaping of the historical memory of rural places, with the aim of reflexively redefining territorial identities and development pathways. This occurs through interaction among different social groups - residents and non-residents (e.g. students, rural users) - who bring diverse imaginaries and expectations regarding rural functions.

4.2. *Students: Multidimensional mobility, demand for experiential learning, and beyond*

Student mobility is often conceived as an instrument for acquiring a “broader cultural experience”, a way to enhance one's cultural capital and to ‘reap future social and economic benefits’ (Bourdieu, 1986; Tokas et al., 2023, p. 162). People move to take advantage of opportunities in increasingly interdependent contexts (Brooks and Waters, 2010), not only at the transnational level (transnational mobility) but also within the same country or territory (internal mobility). Investment in education in non-usual contexts can help students to accumulate and consolidate soft skills and foster the development of new networks (ibid.). The motivations guiding students' choices can be manifold and are not exclusively oriented towards learning; they may also be influenced by factors such as the history of a place, its morphology, and the possibility of spending time in appealing natural environments (e.g. proximity to natural parks).

In the case of temporary mobilities within the RMP, the ex-ante survey shows that students' motivations are strongly centred on experiential learning opportunities. Experiential learning is often understood as an educational approach that connects university education with practice, fosters interdisciplinary learning, links students to work experiences, and enhances their engagement and empowerment (Domask, 2007).

When RMP students come from the same country (i.e., Italy) in which the rural mobility takes place (*internal mobility*), they tend to be driven by an interest in gaining a deeper understanding - through new and more structured perspectives - of areas that may share similarities with their own:

*‘I chose a traineeship in Italy because I had already spent two of my four years at university abroad, so I wanted to have a new experience in my country and close to where I live, in order to better understand my region and its local dynamics’* (F., RMP Student [hereinafter RMPS] – Ostana, resident in the rural village of Torre Pellice, Turin Province).

Focus groups also confirm this perspective: internal rural mobility is perceived as an opportunity to learn, understand, and discuss - within both international and local groups - new trajectories and grassroots initiatives for local development, which may be tested and scaled up in other nearby contexts.

At the same time, the study highlights that the student group included participants from different countries, namely Azerbaijan, Iran, and Russia, who were also temporary or incoming students at UNITO. They were therefore experiencing a form of *double mobility*, entailing a primary transnational movement *from their home countries to Italy* (UNITO) for study purposes (Fig. 3), followed by an *internal movement from the city (Turin) to the mountain rural area* - ‘I am interested in learning more deeply about the region in which I now live’ (I., RMPS – Sordevolo, Russian nationality) - thus partially as an escape from city life. In this case, the learning process - beyond acquiring new skills - was oriented towards learning about the area through a cognitive connection linking urban and rural mountainous areas.

Learning as a process of knowledge acquisition appears frequently in both the ex-ante and ex-post assessments of RMP motivations and expectations. “Knowledge” can be broadly defined as the ability to situate individual know-how within social settings and to recognize its productive and interactive nature (Williams and Baláz, 2008). In this sense, experiential learning ‘has moved from the periphery of education to the center’ (Lewis and Williams, 1994, p. 5), becoming a key instrument in higher education. The program is grounded in the principles of experiential learning, and students articulate motivations and expectations related to a differentiated yet interconnected system of knowledge acquisition. This system comprises multiple knowledge typologies, including organizational practices linked to the specific activities implemented by each RMP host organization, interpersonal shared understandings, mediated and collectively constructed systems of meaning. It extends beyond the usual academic system of codified knowledge.

The educational dimension represents a key and common element in

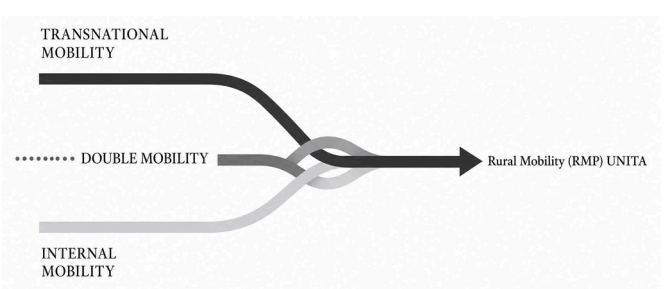


Fig. 3. RMP Multidimensionality according to the multilocality of the students' mobilities.  
Source: Authors' elaboration

shaping expectations regarding the RMP experience. Namely, all students referred to it - through different forms and individual interpretations - in their lists of expectations. Nonetheless, an analysis of these individual accounts suggests that RMP students' expectations can be classified into five distinct typologies (Fig. 4), which are differently selected and combined across file profiles.

1. **Locational expectations:** expectations related to the physical attributes of the local area, such as territorial morphology or weather conditions. The data show specific personal preferences and expectations regarding the mountainous nature of the territory. While this may appear as an obvious and primary element, it is not systematically expressed by all participants, unlike educational expectations. Moreover, in more detailed accounts, locational elements are directly connected to desired accommodation conditions: '[...] I expect [...] that it will not be cold at night and that I will be able to shower with warm water' (I., RMPS – Sordevolo).
2. **Educational expectations:** expectations related to the acquisition of diverse forms of knowledge and engagement in training and work-related activities.
3. **Cultural expectations:** closely related to the previous category, these refer to expectations of broadening personal perspectives on both Italian (for international students) and local cultures, through processes of intercultural exchange.
4. **Recreational expectations:** expectations related to leisure activities and opportunities to temporarily escape daily and urban routines.
5. **Relational expectations:** these refer primarily to three types of networking dynamics: interactions among international students; interactions between students, host organizations, and other stakeholders involved in local projects; and interactions between students and the wider local community (e.g. residents). While most relational expectations focus on these forms of networking, they also include a dimension that can be interpreted as an "immaterial locational expectation", linked to the desire to encounter a welcoming and cohesive rural community in which the host organization is well embedded in the surrounding territory and its social fabric: 'I expect to find a welcoming community with many ideas and projects related to the territory' (M., RMPS – Paraloup).

Going into further depth in the qualitative ex-ante descriptions, we

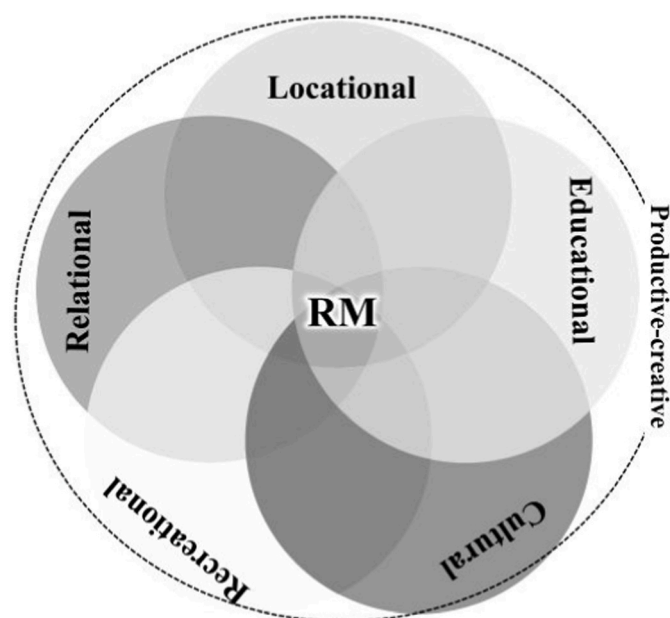


Fig. 4. Typologies of RMP students' expectations. Source: Authors' elaboration

can identify an additional cross-cutting expectation typology, namely *productive-creative expectations*, which entail the idea of producing 'something useful' (M., RMPS – Paraloup) for the host organization's activities while becoming part of a learning process. For example, one student states: 'I expect to [...] create some new materials for the library, and in doing so I also expect to learn a lot about the community' (F., RMPS – Ostana). Accordingly, alongside the centrality of the educational dimension - encompassing differentiated knowledge acquisition, job training, and cultural interaction - the relational aspect emerges as pivotal in shaping both motivations and expectations. With regard to expectations, the entire student group emphasized the relational dimension. At the level of motivations, this dimension mainly appears in terms of a general and indistinct desire to establish "new personal contacts" or to meet "new people". At the level of expectations, it is primarily articulated through networking dynamics within the student and working group. However, when considering interactions between students and the wider local community, the relational dimension is further expressed in the expectation of encountering a welcoming and cohesive community (as observed in the Ostana case).

Finally, focusing on data from the ex-post assessment of RMP students' motivations and expectations, we can observe that the interactions emerging from the focus groups highlight an additional element of networking, namely a connection to new forms of rural activism and emerging experiences of collective back-to-the-land initiatives. In Sordevolo, one participant emphasized that her interest in going to the province of Biella was strongly influenced by the perception that, in that local context, there were organized and highly skilled groups of young professionals working to identify new endogenous development trajectories. Hence, there was a personal willingness not simply to create a network, but to temporarily become part of this local activism, in order to gain relational, organizational, and project-strategy experiences that could be re-framed, discussed, and potentially scaled up in similar contexts in home territories. Moreover, one student - when detailing her RMP motivations - expressed a sense of belonging that was not articulated as an attachment to a specific place or community (e.g. by referring to a particular rural village), but rather as an intimate sense of belonging to the rural dimension itself, contrasted with the prospect of future life and work paths in the city:

*'I feel rural. I think it is mostly a passion. I study international science, so you could say that it is not directly linked to what I am doing here, but it is mostly a question of feeling, where you feel at home. I studied in Milan, but I did not live there, and then in Turin, where I live now, but I am from the province of Varese, and my town has fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, so my background is quite rural. [...] I want to live in a rural place, and I do not want to go back to the city' (M., RMPS – Paraloup, focus group, July 2023).*

This was related to the opportunity to test herself in the everyday life of a rural area, in connection with learning and training processes that extend beyond the RMP offer to encompass broader aspects of local rural organization and the economy:

*'[...] In the near future, I will stay here longer than now. I want to gain more experience in shepherding activities. When you make cheese, you need time to see the whole process. Here, I woke up earlier to go there [to the pasture with the shepherd] before starting to work [for the RMP]. I want to do that [the student, during the RMP period, decided to work in the mountain pasture beyond her training within the RMP, helping the only shepherd in the village and deciding to extend her stay for about three weeks to continue the shepherding work]. The fact that there was a shepherd [thanks to a project launched by the host organization to reactivate pastoralism in Paraloup] was quite decisive in my choice to undertake a rural mobility experience here. [...] In my future, I can see myself in a place like this, so I decided to come here also for a very pragmatic reason, because I wanted to know if I could do it, if it would work for me in general, because here I discovered some dynamics.*

For example, there are people who work here for a season and then go back. There can be some conflicts, so I would like to be prepared for my future by trying to stay within these dynamics, to understand if it is possible' (M., RMPS – Paraloup, focus group, July 2023).

Within this framework, it is important to note that the daily work routines of RMP students in host contexts foster immersion in a “rural experience” that extends beyond the confines of traditional rural industries, agrarian profiles, and static notions of rural social cohesion. This contrasts with simplified understandings of the rural world, often reduced to a limited set of ‘definitive’ elements (e.g. green fields, agriculture, community cohesion) (Halfacree and Williams, 2021, p. 377), which constitute the basis of a partial representation of a broader and more complex rurality that students seek to grasp, also by challenging their previous personal expectations:

‘I found it very interesting to have a library with these types of services around [restaurant, museum, mountain lodging managed by the same entity], a space like this in a rural area of this kind [...]’ (RMPS-6 – FC Paraloup).

‘Here there is a need for stronger involvement of locals: to make them feel the place as ‘theirs’, through events and initiatives more directly focused on their involvement and engagement [...]. Paraloup needs to build stronger connections between the villages down in the valley’ (RMPS-5 – FC Paraloup).

To conclude, it can be asserted that - across both RMP students’ motivations and expectations - four main macro-factors, or “personal investments”, emerge as key drivers (Fig. 5).

1. Firstly, a *positional investment* (Pyvis and Chapman, 2007), referring to factors that appear ‘pragmatic and instrumental’ (Tran, 2016, p. 1272). These include the potential acquisition of technical, organizational, and relational skills that may enable students to develop a competitive advantage in their lives, both socially and economically (e.g., networking and communication skills, project management skills).

2. Secondly, a *transformative investment*, encompassing factors related to the acquisition of elements of the multifaceted knowledge outlined above, as well as the experience of everyday rural life. These aspects can contribute to enriching and reshaping students’ cultural, professional, and personal perspectives (Pyvis and Chapman, 2007; Robertson et al., 2011; Tran, 2016).
3. Thirdly, an *explorative investment*, referring to factors linked to the opportunity to encounter and engage with different local contexts. This may involve: (i) experiencing a foreign country toward which students feel cultural attraction or curiosity (e.g., international students’ interest in Italian culture) (transnational mobility); (ii) rediscovering their home territory through new perspectives (internal mobility); and (iii) visiting places within the region beyond those typically frequented during their university experience (double mobility).
4. Finally, an *activist investment*, defined as the willingness to become part of broader networks aimed at rural and mountain (re)vitalization. This form of transnational engagement may involve participation in networks, activities, and - in some cases - lifestyles that are not necessarily present in students’ home contexts or societies.

### 5. Discussion

The previous section revealed the variety of motivations and expectations of rural host organizations and students participating in the RMP. Taken together, these define a relational perspective that connects different practices and knowledge systems, articulated through and reflecting diverse ways of reimagining space.

Both hosts and students, when describing expectations and motivations, strongly frame their engagement in the RMP around the centrality of activating processes of mutual exchange and co-learning, whereby rural space itself does not emerge as a bounded and fixed arena, but rather as a processual and co-produced construction. Within this framework, rural areas are positioned as having the potential to engage in international collaborations in higher education, with rural villages emerging as suitable sites for learning. The formalization of synergies between universities and rural stakeholders in shaping territorial educational offerings can be understood as an institutional tool to counter the marginalization of rural areas within the higher education system. In this sense, it creates an institutional space for advancing the recognition and reconfiguration of localized rural functions, in line with the needs and interests of (part of) rural residents, as well as with the new demands posed by external groups, such as students.

The findings show that hosts’ motivations are predominantly non-economic - although economic aspects remain important for long-term sustainability - and are strongly embedded in value-driven, knowledge-oriented, and network-building logics. From the students’ perspective, motivations and expectations reveal a multidimensional understanding of mobility that goes beyond traditional educational goals. While experiential learning remains central, students’ engagement is also shaped by relational, exploratory, and, in some cases, activist orientations. The emergence of “double mobility” patterns and the diversification of expectation typologies indicate that temporary rural mobility cannot be reduced to a simple educational experience, but should rather be understood as part of broader trajectories of personal, professional, and spatial repositioning, in which rurality and rural space acquire a non-marginal role. In particular, the identification of activist investments suggests that some students do not conceive rural space merely as a temporary site of mobility for knowledge acquisition - primarily framed through positional and transformative investments - but actively engage with its social fabric as a potential space for future life projects. Moreover, with regard to educational expectations and the mobilization of positional investment, it should be noted that rural areas are emerging as environments capable of offering students valuable soft skills and knowledge systems applicable across a wide range of professional and life contexts (e.g. project design skills), thanks to an extensive

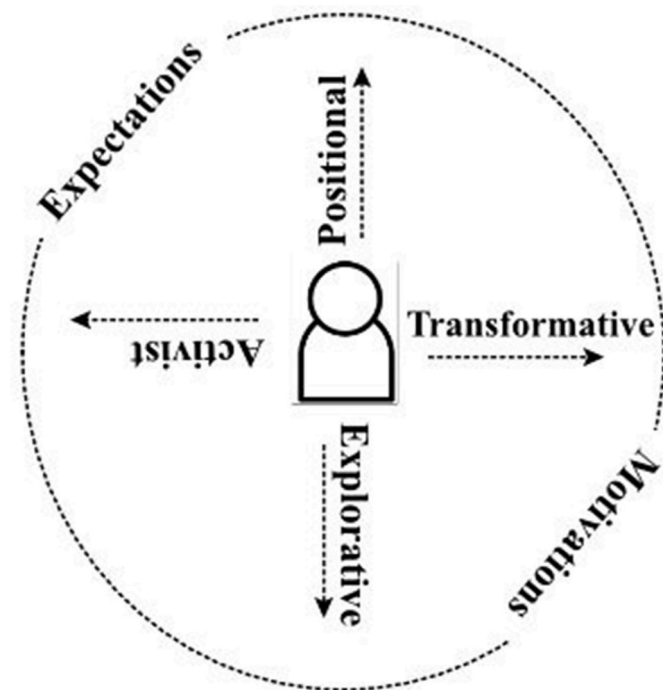


Fig. 5. Personal investments structuring students’ motivations and expectations.

Source: Authors’ Elaboration

urban–rural alliance involving local universities and rural organizations. These skills are not limited to rural settings or rural development applications.

This challenges metrocentric discourses of cultural and developmental innovation associated with imaginaries of exclusive “smart” urbanities (Roberts and Green, 2013), which are often positioned in contrast to devalued “backward” ruralities.

Furthermore, analyzing the range of activities offered by host organizations alongside the educational expectations and motivations of students sheds light on how these factors are shaped both by the heterogeneous profiles and differentiated knowledge-acquisition needs, and place-based demands emerging from the host organizations' specific activities, such as management and marketing of sustainable tourism to archival research. In doing so, the RMP's higher education offer both reflects and contributes to an ongoing diversification of rural economies, extending beyond traditional imaginaries that have historically confined rurality to agrarian landscapes and agricultural practices. Such representations, often functioning as a ‘metonymic shorthand’ in everyday comprehension of the rural world (Halfacree and Williams, 2021, p. 377), are challenged by the articulated student profiles sought by host organizations for their varied activities.

From the perspective of challenging consolidated imaginaries of rurality, analyzing the interplay between hosts' and students' motivations and expectations highlights also how hosts perceive the presence of external actors as a means to counteract not only widespread imaginaries of rurality that are seen as diverging from their lived realities, but also internalized representations and related narratives of decline, thereby introducing new visions and stimulating local communities. Indeed, hosts recognize students as agents capable of uncovering “sleeping local resources”, thus challenging fatalistic localisms associated with imaginaries of rural emptiness and immobility.

Likewise, the relational dynamics activated through the RMP allow students to reconsider their pre-existing imaginaries that may diverge from the lived realities of rural places, including assumptions of inherent social cohesiveness. As previously discussed, the expectation of encountering cohesive and internally connected rural communities is less pronounced compared, for example, to the expectation of acquiring knowledge. Although this element plays a smaller part in students' narratives, it remains important for the analysis, as it occupies a central position in the discourse surrounding rural imaginaries and warrants further attention in future studies of the RMP (or similar ones), to better understand how the program itself could, for example, contribute to further bridging the gap between hosts and local communities through its activities with students. As highlighted before, students noted that, in one host context, the host organization's activities appeared to be primarily oriented towards external visitors and only weakly integrated with the resident community, which showed limited participation in - or even awareness of - the local development initiatives promoted by the host.

In the literature, attributions of static cohesiveness are frequently discussed as features that foster misleading and idealized representations of rural life, often referred to as “rural idylls”. These representations may, at times, originate from normative processes and power dynamics (Theodori and Luloff, 2000; Shucksmith, 2018). While there is nothing inherently problematic in such expectations, or in the nostalgia for particular forms of sociality that may appear more elusive in some urban contexts, it is important to recognize that these constructions are both spatially and historically contingent. Rural communities have traditionally been characterized by strong social networks based on kinship, religion, and shared cultural values (Reimer and Bollman, 2010). However, such features do not systematically guarantee cohesion, and they are not immutable; rather, they may also become potential sources of tension within processes of rural change, particularly in relation to the increasing diversification of mobile and resident populations, and their associated activities.

Overall, these findings resonate with the literature on rural

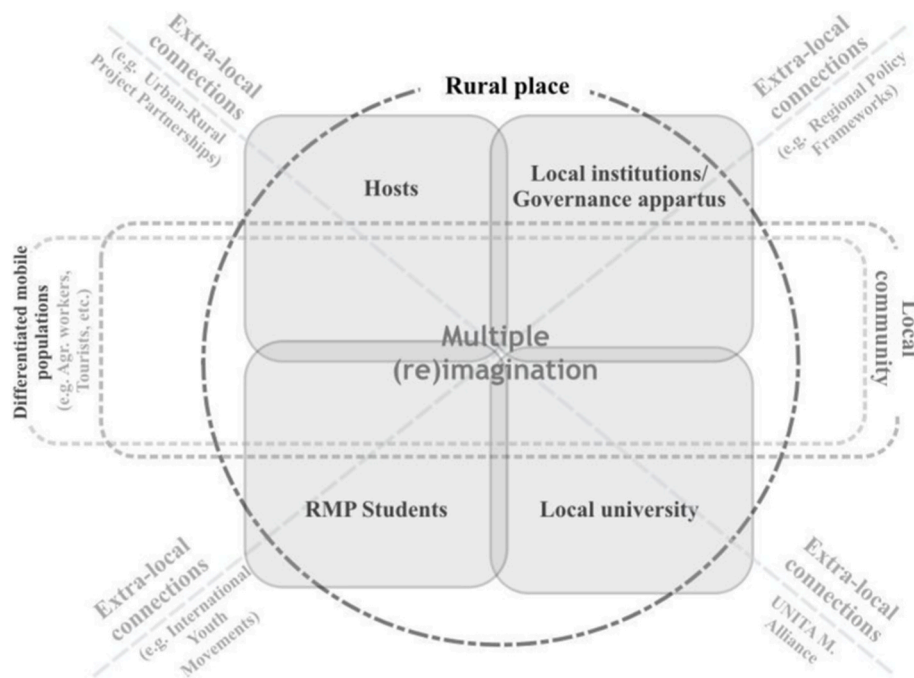
imaginaries, confirming that representations of the rural are continuously negotiated, reconfigured, and performatively produced through practice and interaction sustained also by new mobility flows. In this sense, the RMP can be interpreted as a socio-spatial “meeting point” where insider and outsider perspectives intersect, generating hybrid, contingent, and evolving views of the rural that challenge structuralist determinisms and idealist reductionisms. Fundamentally, the relational perspective at the core of the RMP directs attention to the significance and potential of networks and flows that criss-cross rural - and urban - spaces, providing a basis for depicting rurality not as a self-contained formation, but as the outcome of the juxtaposition and interaction of multiple elements, further shaped by broader macro-dynamics unfolding “beyond the rural” (Pandey, 2003; Woods, 2007) (Fig. 6).

In this scenario, the RMP appears as an expression of a broader rural epistemological turn, through which the construction of rurality reflects what Carmo (2009) describes as a shift from discourses of “opposition” to processes of “appropriation”, whereby rurality and rural areas are redefined in terms of multifaceted identities, even if these do not always converge.

## 6. Final remarks

This article explores the largely understudied intersection between temporary higher education mobility and the social and political construction of rurality. By focusing on the RMP in Italy and Spain, the study contributes to expanding the theoretical and empirical boundaries of research that interconnects processes of rural differentiation, with particular attention to imaginative trajectories, and the role played by new mobility flows. From a theoretical perspective, the article draws on the concept of rural imaginaries to demonstrate how rurality is not a fixed condition but a multidimensional social construction, shaped through the interplay between external and internal actors. The expectations and motivations, along with the emerging imaginaries brought by participating students, are neither neutral nor inconsequential, but they actively interact with the endogenous rural strategies and micro-politics of local communities where the host organizations are based. This interaction generates hybrid spaces in which new rural narratives are negotiated and performed. From an empirical perspective, the research provides original insights into the phenomenon of temporary student mobility in rural areas. This phenomenon is gaining practical relevance as a mechanism to enhance local development strategies, particularly in strengthening urban–rural connections, yet it remains underexplored in the academic literature. The findings highlight how such programs can function both as valuable educational experiences and as contexts for producing and disseminating new rural discourses.

This study thus calls for greater analytical and policy attention to these micro-processes, in order to further assess and strengthen their context-specific validity, as well as their potential and real impacts in the medium and long term. The objectives that UNITA with the RMP seeks to promote are not linearly certain nor achievable through the mere activation of internships alone; they also depend on the capacity of the overall organizational framework to circulate, accommodate, and, where necessary, reorient the motivations and expectations expressed by the different groups involved. In the case of the RMP, for instance, it will be important to understand whether and how the non-economic motivations of hosts will continue to remain marginal to participation, especially considering that the financial support provided by UNITA is directed only to students and to cover accommodation and subsistence costs, rather than to the concrete mentoring and support work carried out by hosts. Monitoring these dynamics over time may provide further insight into the long-term economic and social sustainability of such initiatives, as well as how they are received by local institutions and potentially integrated - through multiannual public funding - into territorial development strategies, thereby recognizing and consolidating their value.



**Fig. 6.** Relational configurations of the RMP in processes of rural place reimagining.  
Source: Authors' Elaboration

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## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Francesca Uleri:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Elena Brusadelli:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. **Vittorio Martone:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Giacomo Pettenati:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

## Declaration of competing interests

As authors of the article "Temporary higher education mobility and reimagining of rural areas: Insights into the motivations and expectations of students and hosts in the UNITA Rural Mobility Program in Italy and Spain" - Manuscript ID: RURAL-D-24-02590 we have nothing to declare.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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