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Mobility Quest: a daily journey through international mobility



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Introduction

This game was created as a reflective tool to accompany the learning journey of young people participating in international mobility experiences. Whether through Erasmus+, volunteering, youth exchanges, or other forms of cross-border engagement, young people undergo profound transformations that affect not only their knowledge and skills but also their values, attitudes, and emotional resilience. Yet, the inner journey of mobility, the challenges, cultural adjustments, identity shifts, and sense-making processes, often remains unspoken or under-explored.

Drawing inspiration from intercultural learning theory and the well-established U-Curve and W-Curve models of cultural adaptation, this game offers a playful yet structured way to reflect on the ups and downs of going abroad and coming home. It enables participants to explore their experiences through the lens of five key competences: intercultural communication, social responsibility, personal growth, professional skills, and innovative thinking, while also navigating real-life scenarios based on common mobility challenges.

The game is built around the emotional arc of international mobility, divided into five phases: Getting Ready, First Steps, Life Abroad, Last Moments, and Back Home. Each phase reflects a distinct part of the mobility journey, from anticipation and adaptation to reflection and reintegration. By engaging with situation-based Challenge Cards and linking them to Competence Cards, players are invited to articulate their learning, share their emotions, and recognise how growth happens even in the most uncertain moments.

Designed for use in youth work, education, and mobility programmes, this game can be played in small groups, workshops, or one-on-one coaching. It requires no prior knowledge, only a willingness to reflect, connect, and engage in dialogue. Whether used as a debriefing activity, a training tool, or a peer-to-peer learning method, the game transforms experience into insight, and insight into action.



Ultimately, this game is not about winning. It is about storytelling, listening, and learning from the journey. Because every mobility experience is unique, and every curve tells a story.

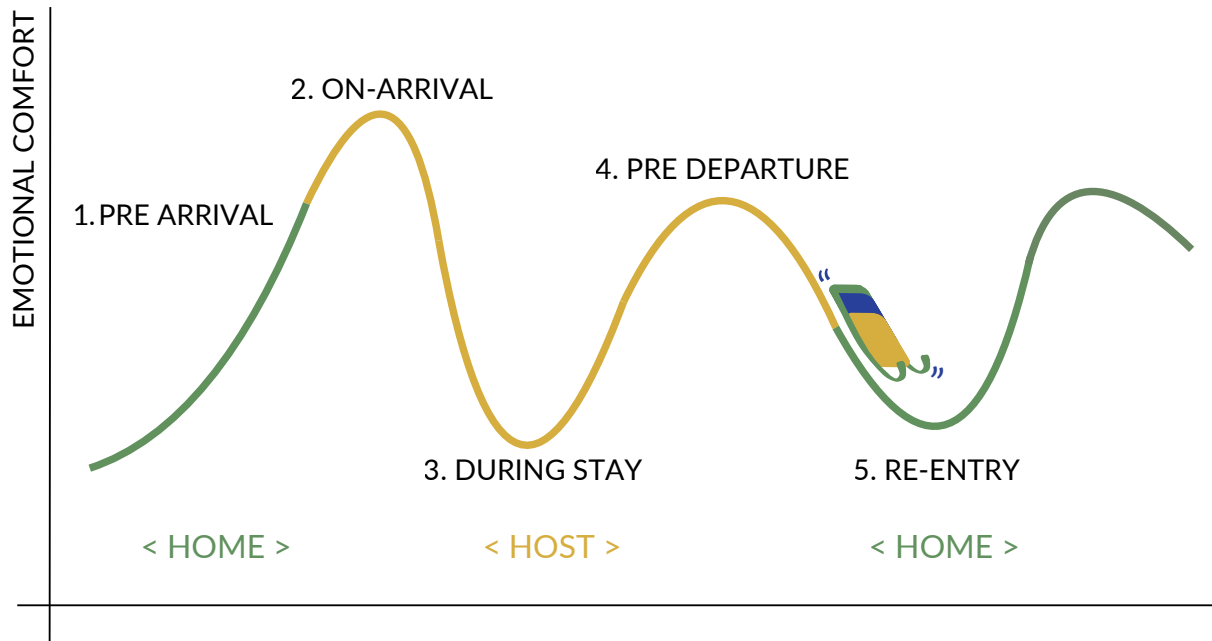
The international student lifecycle: rationale behind the game design

This card game was conceptualised as an experiential and reflective learning tool to accompany the international mobility journey of young people. Grounded in intercultural theory and experiential learning principles, the game draws on the emotional trajectory articulated in the **U-Curve** and **W-Curve** models of cultural adjustment, originally proposed by Oberg (1960) and later expanded by Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963) and Perez Encinas et al. (2018). These models describe the psychosocial responses individuals experience when entering and later re-entering cultural contexts that are unfamiliar or once familiar but now experienced anew.

The game seeks to simulate this journey through an evolving set of challenges aligned with five phases of the **International Student Lifecycle**: *Pre Arrival*, *On-Arrival*, *During Stay*, *Pre Departure*, and *Re-Entry*. These stages not only reflect the logistical progression of a mobility experience but also map onto common emotional and cognitive responses described in research on intercultural adaptation. The shape of the curve, first descending, then rising, then dipping again upon return before stabilising, serves as a visual and conceptual anchor for the game's structure. The model below was taken from Gabriels, W., Kotkiewicz, G. (2025) Roadmap for Learning during an International Student Lifecycle. Brussels, Erasmus Careers Consortium.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT LIFECYCLE


Cultural Adjustment curve during International student mobility



Understanding the curve: the shape of adaptation

The initial **high point** (Phase 1: Pre Arrival) corresponds to the so-called “honeymoon” phase, where novelty and excitement dominate. This is followed by a **sharp dip** (Phase 2: On-Arrival), representing the onset of cultural dissonance and frustration as differences become salient and adaptation is demanded. The **lowest point** (Phase 3: During Stay) often reflects moments of homesickness, confusion, or a sense of helplessness.

With time, individuals typically begin to develop coping mechanisms, intercultural competencies, and emotional resilience, leading to a **gradual upward slope** (Phase 4: Pre Departure), where the host country starts to feel more familiar or even like a second home. Upon returning (Phase 5: Re-Entry), however, individuals frequently experience a second decline, indicative of reverse culture shock, a period marked by alienation or



disconnect from one's original environment. This stabilises only once individuals begin to **integrate** their international experience into their identity, allowing them to navigate their home context with new perspectives.

The **zigzagging line of the W-curve** is thus more than aesthetic, it visually narrates a psychological process of disorientation, growth, and reintegration. Incorporating this shape into the game design allows participants to experience these emotional transitions in metaphorical form, offering a space for reflection and dialogue.

From theory to practice: the pedagogical function of the game

By assigning players challenges rooted in real-life mobility experiences, the game activates both **cognitive recall** and **emotional awareness**. Each challenge is paired with a competence card (e.g., intercultural communication, personal growth), prompting players to respond reflectively and make connections between experiences and skills developed.

The act of collectively voting on the relevance of answers fosters **peer learning**, while the open-ended format of responses encourages **critical thinking and self-assessment**. The use of structured rounds aligned with the lifecycle phases creates a narrative flow, guiding players through a simulated adaptation journey and offering natural opportunities for group discussion on identity, change, and integration.

Moreover, the game's flexibility, allowing for both competitive and cooperative modes, makes it adaptable to various settings: as a **training tool in pre-departure or re-entry workshops**, a **debriefing method** post-mobility, or a **facilitated activity** within intercultural learning programmes. It is particularly suited to Erasmus+ contexts, youth exchanges, and higher education environments committed to fostering reflective internationalisation.



The Card Game

Objective

The goal of the game is to earn the highest number of **Competence Points** by successfully tackling realistic challenges related to the **International Student Lifecycle**. Players respond to situational prompts and reflect on personal experiences or hypothetical reactions while actively engaging with soft skills.

- Each **Challenge Card** awards 1 to 3 points based on difficulty
- If the **Competence Card** matches the core competence required by the challenge, the player gains **+2 bonus points**
- After 5 rounds, players tally their points to determine the winner
- Players face challenges simultaneously and reflect together

Theme

The game simulates an international mobility journey, covering the full cycle from pre-arrival to re-entry. It encourages players to reflect on their own experiences or anticipate real-life situations in mobility.

Turn structure

1. Draw Phase: At the start of each round, each player draws one **Competence Card** and one **Challenge Card** from the relevant lifecycle phase.

2. Exchange Phase (2 minutes total): **Players may negotiate and exchange Competence Cards** or use **Joker Cards** to try to match the challenge's skill.

3. Response Phase (max 1 minute per player): Each player presents a brief response to their challenge, demonstrating how they would handle the situation **using the assigned skill**.

4. Voting Phase: The group discusses the response. Each player **votes (thumbs up/down)** on whether the response was valid and relevant to the skill. If the majority agrees, the player earns the challenge's points.

5. Scoring: If the Competence Card matches the required skill, the player earns **+2 bonus points** and keeps both cards. If not, only the Challenge Card is kept (if the answer was validated); the Competence Card is returned to the bottom of the deck.

Phases of the international student lifecycle

1. Getting Ready (Pre Arrival)
2. First Steps (On-Arrival)
3. Life Abroad (During Stay)
4. Last Moments (Pre Departure)
5. Back Home (Re-Entry)

Competences

- Intercultural Communication
- Social Responsibility
- Personal Growth
- Professional Skills
- Innovative Thinking



Card types

- **Competence Cards:** Each features a skill, a short description, and example behaviors
- **Challenge Cards:** Situational prompts from real or hypothetical international student experiences, linked to one main competence
- **Joker Cards** (optional): Used to swap or adapt a Competence Card once per round

Transferability across youth work contexts

The design of this game intentionally supports its use beyond the original development context, offering significant potential for transferability across a wide range of youth organisations, educational programmes, and mobility-related initiatives. Its thematic grounding in intercultural adaptation and personal development, combined with a flexible and low-threshold format, makes it a versatile tool within the broader field of non-formal education.

The game responds to a set of learning needs that are **not exclusive to Erasmus+ students**, but rather shared by young people engaged in diverse forms of mobility, intercultural exchange, civic participation, or volunteering. The core competences addressed, intercultural communication, social responsibility, personal growth, professional skills, and innovative thinking, are broadly relevant across youth work practices in Europe and globally.



Pedagogical flexibility

The modular nature of the game, structured around the five phases of the international student lifecycle, allows facilitators to easily tailor the content to different programme structures or thematic focuses. While the game mirrors the typical emotional journey of an international student, the reflection prompts and skill-based challenges can be reframed to suit other contexts, such as:

- International volunteering or solidarity corps experiences
- Youth exchanges and intercultural summer camps
- Inclusion-focused initiatives engaging marginalised youth
- Local civic engagement projects with cross-cultural elements
- Leadership or employability training within youth NGOs

Moreover, the game's reliance on open-ended, discussion-based mechanics enables it to be integrated into both **structured educational programmes** and **informal peer-learning environments**. It does not require prior theoretical knowledge from facilitators or participants, making it accessible to a wide range of practitioners, including youth workers, trainers, mentors, or peer facilitators.

Practical accessibility

From a logistical perspective, the game is **resource-light** and suitable for **low-barrier implementation**. It can be run with basic printed materials, minimal preparation time, and group sizes ranging from small workshops to larger facilitated settings. This makes it particularly attractive to grassroots organisations, student associations, and local youth initiatives that may not have access to extensive training infrastructure.



Adaptability and location

Importantly, the game also invites **customisation**. Organisations may adapt the challenge cards, terminology, or competence framework to reflect their own educational priorities, such as environmental sustainability, democratic participation, or peace education, while maintaining the core mechanics. This adaptability supports the localisation of content without compromising the educational value of the activity.

In sum, the game is designed not only as a reflective tool for international students but also as a **scalable and adaptable educational resource**. Its alignment with the values and practices of youth work, particularly reflection, participation, and competence development, positions it as a meaningful contribution to the broader field of non-formal learning.

Facilitator handout – implementing Mobility Quest

Overview

This card game is a structured yet flexible reflection tool designed for use in international mobility and youth engagement contexts. It facilitates meaningful conversations around intercultural adaptation, emotional transitions, and key competence development throughout the mobility journey. The game aligns with five phases of the **International Student Lifecycle** and is adaptable for various group settings.



Objectives of the game

- Support participants in reflecting on their mobility experiences (real or anticipated)
- Foster awareness of transversal competences such as intercultural communication, personal growth, and resilience
- Encourage peer-to-peer learning and validation through storytelling and discussion
- Provide an accessible, low-barrier activity for debriefing and training sessions

Target groups

- International students (Erasmus+, exchange, degree mobility)
- Youth exchange participants
- ESC volunteers or returning volunteers
- Participants in intercultural trainings or preparatory seminars

Recommended group size: **3–5 players per group**

Materials needed

- One deck of Challenge Cards (divided by mobility phase)
- One deck of Competence Cards
- Optional: Joker Cards
- Score sheets or small tokens (optional)
- Timer (or phone clock) for time-limited responses

Game structure

1. Game phases: Each round corresponds to one phase of the International Student Lifecycle:

- Getting Ready (Pre Arrival)
- First Steps (On-Arrival)
- Life Abroad (During Stay)
- Last Moments (Pre Departure)
- Back Home (Re-Entry)

2. Player turn steps:

- Draw one **Challenge Card** and one **Competence Card**
- Optional: negotiate to exchange Competence Cards or use a Joker
- Prepare a response (max **1 minute**) linking the competence to the challenge
- Share response with group
- Group votes to validate the answer (thumbs up/down or tokens)
- Points awarded if valid; bonus points if skill matches challenge

Facilitation tips

- **Set the tone:** Explain the purpose of the game as reflective, not competitive (unless you choose a more dynamic setting)
- **Introduce the curve:** Present the emotional curve (U/W-curve) and explain its connection to the game structure
- **Model vulnerability:** Share your own mobility anecdote to lower the barrier for sharing
- **Encourage relevance:** Remind players to clearly link their answers to the assigned competence
- **Use a timer:** Keep rounds focused and avoid long monologues
- **Debrief regularly:** After each phase or at the end, reflect as a group on emerging insights, shared experiences, or emotional patterns

Expected outcomes

Participants will:

- Articulate emotional and experiential highs and lows of mobility
- Recognise the skills they gained and how they were developed
- Deepen empathy through listening and shared reflection
- Begin integrating their experience into personal or professional narratives

Follow-up ideas

- Create a visual "learning map" of competences developed
- Invite participants to write a short mobility story
- Link the game to Youthpass or similar recognition tools

Narrative example: a full game session with 4 players

This example illustrates how a full game round unfolds in Mobility Quest. It follows a group of four fictional players - Lina, Sara, Ahmed, and Thomas - as they move through the five rounds, each corresponding to a phase of the international mobility journey. The setting is an Erasmus+ re-entry workshop, and a facilitator is present to guide the process.

Round 1: Getting Ready

Each player draws one **Challenge Card** and one **Competence Card** related to the Pre-arrival phase. They have one minute to prepare their response.

- **Lina's challenge** is: "You are packing and realise you might have no access to your regular food or clothes." Her Competence Card is Personal Growth. She reflects on how she had to mentally prepare for letting go of comforts and how that helped her become more adaptable.
- **Sara** draws a challenge about finding out that her accommodation has been cancelled last minute. Her Competence Card is Innovative Thinking. She shares how she reached out to students online and found a temporary host through a Facebook group.
- **Ahmed** faces a challenge about fear of being judged for his accent. His Competence Card is Intercultural Communication. He talks about practising his English with friends and reminding himself that accents are part of identity.
- **Thomas** has a challenge related to not receiving his visa on time. His Competence is Professional Skills. He explains how he contacted the embassy, restructured his timeline, and managed stress through planning.

Each player shares their one-minute response. The group votes, validating each answer. Lina and Sara receive bonus points for clear alignment between their competences and challenges.

Round 2: First Steps

New Challenge and Competence Cards are drawn.

- **Sara** draws a challenge about not understanding the local transportation system. Her Competence is Social Responsibility. She reflects on how she helped a fellow student get around and later created a small orientation guide.
- **Ahmed's** challenge is about attending his first class and not understanding the local teaching style. His Competence is *Personal Growth*. He shares how he adapted by asking questions and keeping a journal to track his progress.
- **Thomas** faces a challenge about feeling isolated in the first week. His Competence is *Intercultural Communication*. He talks about initiating small conversations with flatmates and joining student groups.

- **Lina** draws a challenge on handling administrative tasks in a different language. Her Competence is Professional Skills. She describes using translation apps and asking staff for support, which helped her develop initiative and patience.
- Once again, everyone shares their responses. The facilitator encourages players to link their answers explicitly to their competences. All players receive full points, with Lina and Thomas receiving the bonus.

Round 3: Life Abroad

This round typically brings deeper emotional reflection.

- **Ahmed** has a challenge about a conflict in a group project. His Competence is Innovative Thinking. He shares how he proposed a new structure for the group to communicate and resolve misunderstandings.
- **Thomas** draws a challenge about facing discrimination. His Competence is Social Responsibility. He speaks about supporting a friend who experienced a similar situation and helping to file a report.
- **Lina's** challenge is about financial stress mid-way through her mobility. Her Competence is Personal Growth. She recounts how she managed to budget better and found a part-time job.
- **Sara** faces homesickness. Her Competence is Intercultural Communication. She reflects on how building new cultural rituals with friends helped her feel more connected.

This round sparks more dialogue after each answer. Players nod in recognition and share similar feelings. The facilitator allows 2 extra minutes for a brief group reflection before moving on.

Round 4: Last Moments

- **Thomas** draws a challenge about not wanting to leave. His Competence is Personal Growth. He talks about recognising how much he had changed and how difficult it was to say goodbye.
- **Lina** has a challenge about helping new students settle in before leaving. Her Competence is Social Responsibility. She describes organising a Q&A session for the incoming group.
- **Ahmed** faces a challenge on writing a farewell speech. His Competence is Professional Skills. He shares how he used public speaking techniques to balance humour and emotion.
- **Sara**'s challenge is about uncertainty regarding what comes next. Her Competence is Innovative Thinking. She talks about using mind maps and career planning tools to reflect on her next steps.

This round brings a mix of nostalgia and anticipation. All players demonstrate strong links between their actions and the competences. Bonus points are awarded accordingly.

Round 5: Back Home

The group draws their final round of cards.

- **Lina**'s challenge is about feeling disconnected from her old friend group. Her Competence is Intercultural Communication. She shares how she introduced new perspectives and learned to navigate reverse culture shock.
- **Ahmed** faces a challenge about re-adapting to family routines. His Competence is Social Responsibility. He reflects on learning to appreciate different roles at home and initiating new habits.
- **Sara** draws a challenge on having trouble expressing what she experienced. Her Competence is Professional Skills. She describes creating a photo blog to articulate her learning.

- **Thomas** has a challenge about missing the independence he had abroad. His Competence is Innovative Thinking. He talks about building a new routine at home to sustain his growth.

The round is rich in emotional insight. The facilitator wraps up with a 10-minute debrief asking players to reflect on how they saw themselves evolve and which competences stood out most.

Conclusion

Players tally their points, but the emphasis is on learning and sharing. Each participant leaves with a deeper understanding of their journey, the emotional landscape of mobility, and the skills they developed along the way. The facilitator invites participants to write one sentence summarising their key takeaway, which are then shared aloud or added to a reflective wall.

This narrative illustrates how the game balances structure and flexibility, offering space for individual insight, peer connection, and guided facilitation across a full mobility reflection arc.



Game Cards

[Download the challenge cards here!](#)

[Download the competence cards here!](#)

COMPETENCE CARD

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

It emphasises understanding cultural differences and developing the ability to communicate across these differences effectively.



COMPETENCE CARD

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The ability to act as a responsible citizen by participating fully in civic and social life, understanding social, economic, legal, and political concepts, and contributing to community improvement.

COMPETENCE CARD

PERSONAL GROWTH

The ability to react to challenges, disruptions, and change, and recover from setbacks and adversity.

COMPETENCE CARD

PLOT-TWIST!

Re-draw and keep this card to re-draw at any turn.

COMPETENCE CARD

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The ability to act as a responsible citizen by participating fully in civic and social life, understanding social, economic, legal, and political concepts, and contributing to community improvement.

COMPETENCE CARD

BLANK CARD, WHO DIS?

This card can be any competence—play it wisely!

COMPETENCE CARD

PERSONAL GROWTH

The ability to react to challenges, disruptions, and change, and recover from setbacks and adversity.



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