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Leading internationalisation and staff mobility in Hungarian foundation universities during their exclusion from Erasmus and Horizon Europe

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Research Article

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Abstract

Twenty-one Hungarian universities were barred from new Erasmus+ agreements in December 2022. This penalty followed governance form, which state-run peers escaped. I examine how leaders sustained internationalisation and academic staff competence while the suspension persisted. Documentary process tracing covers Corvinus, Debrecen and Pécs, whereas Eötvös Loránd University, unconverted, provides contrast. Public records constitute the corpus; interviews await. Campuses kept existing projects until mid-2024, and outbound student exchanges then stopped. Six institutions sued, but the court disagreed. Pannónia replaced study grants, and HU-rizont research funding. Mobility managers converted partners bilaterally, and eligible destinations widened far beyond Europe, yet published statistics merge employees with learners. One case capped lecturing at ten days; outcomes went unrecorded. Re-entry began in September 2026, and the ministry reported valid applications from all. Because the Commission proposed lifting the measure only after trusts started dissolving, I read the sanction as reshaping the model it targeted. Return, which requires renewal, needs theorising. The article extends Duchek's resilience stages with a fourth phase and locates institutional work in third-space offices. These findings matter wherever international programme access hinges on political conditionality. Rectors elsewhere can learn which substitution practices survived once reconnection became possible. Professional development, I argue, deserves protection whenever exclusion strikes.

1 Introduction

On 15 December 2022, the European Union's Council imposed a budgetary sanction [1]. It barred new commitments with trusts that maintained universities [1]. Twenty-one institutions fell inside that perimeter, while state-run Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) stayed eligible [2, 3]. Because eligibility tracked governance form rather than nationality, the Hungarian case differs from earlier exclusions [4, 5]. Switzerland lost access; Britain walked away voluntarily [4, 6].

Erasmus+ carries more than money, and its personnel strand builds teaching competence [7]. Mobility changes classrooms, and durable networks follow [7]. 2021 saw 51 Hungarian charters; 49 hosted projects [8]. Losing that infrastructure therefore threatened staff development directly, and early-career researchers felt the shock acutely even at eligible organisations [9]. Lawyers contested legality, and the General Court upheld the decision [10, 11]. Governance scholars mapped board power, and others weighed autonomy, but leadership remained unexamined [12, 13].

What nobody has yet traced is how these affected universities actually led through anticipation, coping, adaptation and the re-entry now under way [14, 15]. I follow it, because timing matters. With documentary process tracing, I compare Corvinus, Debrecen and Pécs with ELTE across nearly forty-six turbulent months. Four questions guide the analysis, which the literature review develops fully. My contribution is a fourth resilience phase that begins when access returns. Similar exclusions may recur, because conditionality increasingly governs eligibility.

2 Literature review

2.1 Internationalisation rests on supranational infrastructure

Here I treat internationalisation as an institutional process resting on external foundations. Knight argued that genuine change usually unfolds within universities [16]. She added that national and sector bodies steer it through policy, money and rules [16]. Across Europe, one highly visible lever is Erasmus+, which Regulation (EU) 2021/817 established for 2021–2027 [17]. Grants flow, and shared procedures travel alongside. Its learning agreements outgrew the programme, and other schemes adopted its transcripts [7].

Staff exchange forms a strand; evidence abounds. Evaluators polled nearly 77,000 people, and academics contributed [7]. Some 43% adopted at least one innovative teaching method abroad, and 59% invite industry lecturers, versus 40% of non-participants [7]. Self-reported intercultural growth reached 91%, and social competence hit 86% [7]. Before exclusion, 51 Hungarian institutions held Erasmus charters, and 49 ran mobility projects [8]. Because almost 80,000 domestic students travelled through it between 2014 and 2021, I read the programme as shared infrastructure, not merely funding [8].

Institutions know what is at stake. Around nine in ten higher education providers rated Erasmus+ very important or essential in the 2019 survey [7]. Staff demand outstripped places at 28% of them, which signals scarcity [7]. Yet mobility's gains peak only when it sits inside an organisational strategy [18]. That is why exclusion tests leadership, not merely budgets.

2.2 When the infrastructure disappears: country-level precedents

Switzerland supplies the most durable recent case of academic exchange outside Erasmus+. Exclusion followed when Swiss voters endorsed 'Against Mass Immigration' [4]. Bern responded with the Swiss-European Mobility Programme (SEMP), which funds placements from state money [19]. Its 2018/19 budget reached 19.7 million francs, while Movetia and 38 institutions jointly implemented it [20].

Continuity largely survived, yet expansion slowed markedly [21]. Applied-science and teacher-training colleges suffered most, and partner agreements had to multiply [21].

Britain withdrew after Brexit; Turing replaced it [6]. Year one carried £110 million, but uptake lagged [5]. Planners expected up to 35,000 participants in 2021–22, yet only 20,822 travelled, and degree students formed 63% of them [5]. Applying proved burdensome, and 79% of tertiary providers said so [5]. The scheme looked beyond Europe, and 65% of higher-education institutions widened opportunities elsewhere [5]. Because outbound journeys alone attracted public money, universities worried about reciprocity before London agreed in December 2025 to rejoin Erasmus + for 2027–28 [5, 22].

Wartime sanctions reveal what isolation provokes. After 2022, Russian universities redirected cooperation toward new partners, according to a content analysis of institutional news [23]. Yet each absence applied nationwide, which left no domestic comparison group. Substitutes also diverged, since SEMP mirrored Erasmus+ while Turing deliberately looked worldwide [5, 19]. Hungary, as the next section shows, breaks this pattern.

2.3 Governance form as the trigger

Hungary's exclusion grew directly out of a domestic overhaul of university control. Kováts and colleagues document how the model change unfolded [2]. Of 28 state-run institutions, 21 eventually switched maintainers in three waves that spanned 2019–2021 [2]. Whereas 86% of students attended public providers in 2018, only 22% did so by 2021 [2]. Boards gained power, and senates lost ground [2, 12]. Distance from government increased, yet academic self-governance shrank, according to property-rights analysis [13].

Brussels objected, and the Council soon acted [1]. Article 2(2) barred contracts, and institutions lost funding [1]. Implementing Decision 2022/2506 covered every public interest trust and its maintained entities, and 21 universities fell within that perimeter [1, 24]. Senior politicians could sit on boards, and mandates lasted indefinitely [2, 15]. Cabinet ministers stepped down, yet the Commission rejected Hungary's December 2024 legislative amendment [2, 15]. Because foreign consortium leaders grew wary of local partners, harm spread beyond the sanctioned group, hitting early-career researchers even at eligible organisations [9].

What followed looks paradoxical at first. On 30 September 2026, the General Court dismissed all six annulment actions brought by affected Hungarian institutions [10, 11]. It held that the measure did not interfere with academic freedom [11]. Days earlier, the Commission had proposed lifting it while trusts were dissolving [15]. What triggered exclusion here, therefore, was governance form itself. The dispute fed back into reform, since Budapest's technical university later preferred corporate maintenance [2]. Remaining state universities hesitated too, which suggests the sanction reshaped the very model it targeted [2].

2.4 Leading under resource loss

Resource dependence theory offers the first lens for reading the Hungarian exclusion. Pfeffer and Salancik argued that environments constrain organisational choice [25]. Actors, they proposed, either alter those surroundings politically or build ties that absorb uncertainty [25]. Small new English universities, Hickey found, pursued both routes when finances tightened, including international partnerships [26]. Finnish institutions adapted; few chose between streams [27]. Foundation campuses arguably did likewise, and six took the Council to court [11].

Dependence explains pressure, yet timing escapes it. Duchek supplies sequence, and resilience becomes a process [14]. She calls it a meta-capability, and she divides it into anticipation, coping and adaptation, each demanding particular organisational skills [14]. COVID-era work favours shared leadership, and communication must flow frequently [28]. Neither strand addresses re-entry, and the stage model stops before lost access returns. Because Hungarian universities are poised to regain Erasmus+ after almost four years outside, they let researchers observe what reconnection demands of management [15].

Who carries that burden matters too. Lawrence and Suddaby define institutional work as the purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions [29]. Upkeep fell to mobility offices, whose staff inhabit a third space [30]. At Corvinus, its international head said 60% of partners switched to Pannónia [31]. Senior-officer studies, which stress transformational leadership, overlook programme exclusion [32, 33].

2.5 Staff competence through mobility, and what is lost when it stops

Staff mobility has drawn less research attention than student exchange within Erasmus+ [7]. Eurydice describes stays of 2–60 days that build skills [8]. Teachers and administrators travel to teach, train and share practice, which strengthens institutional cooperation [8]. When asked why they go abroad, 93% of surveyed employees cite chiefly collaboration and networking [7]. New methods follow, and classrooms change accordingly [7]. Eastern European participants learned most about pedagogy, and gains varied by region [7].

Gains are not automatic, however; context intervenes. Pavlakis and Comas found strategy decisive; reflection mattered [18]. Their eighteen Southern European coordinators linked benefits to institutional embedding, and they blamed workload, weak incentives and procedural complexity [18]. Family ties deterred 67% of non-mobile staff, and duties 64% [7]. Any substitute therefore inherits these frictions, and fresh paperwork can easily compound them [5]. Because Erasmus+ also funded cooperation projects, losing it removed scaffolding that individual grants cannot simply rebuild, as Movetia observed for Swiss universities [21].

What Pannónia offered staff matters here. Official summaries list teaching, training and research stays abroad, with daily rates of 16,500–70,000 Hungarian forints (HUF) [34]. At Pécs, lecturing visits ran 2–10 days, whereas Erasmus+ permits 60 [8, 35]. Yet published figures merge employees with students, which leaves competence effects invisible [34]. No study has asked what affected academics actually lost.

2.6 Synthesis: the gap, the framework and the research questions

Taken together, the five preceding literatures leave one central question conspicuously unanswered. Prior work has not traced how these universities led. Legal analysts tested whether the sanction was lawful, while governance specialists mapped board power [10, 12, 13]. Survey evidence, meanwhile, captured individual researchers rather than the organisations that actually absorbed the shock [9]. Precedents exist, but none is truly comparable. Swiss and British absences applied nationwide, and neither permits domestic comparison groups [5, 19].

Hungary differs, and six features show how. Eligibility tracked organisational form; state peers kept access [3]. The sanction reshaped governance choices, and international offices carried partnerships through the gap, yet nobody has studied either process [2, 31]. Staff mobility survived nominally, but its competence effects went unmeasured [34]. Pannónia extended exchange beyond Europe, and Switzerland's SEMP had instead mirrored Erasmus+ closely [19, 36]. Because re-entry follows exclusion, substitution and judicial confirmation, the episode traces a complete arc that existing resilience models have not yet theorised [11, 14, 15].

Figure 1 shows how these connect. Resource dependence frames the shock as the loss of a critical external input for every affected university [25]. Duchek's three stages, which re-entry extends, then sequence leaders' successive responses [14]. Institutional work identifies who acted, while staff competence marks what ultimately mattered [29, 30]. The four research questions that follow operationalise this framework.

Exclusion is read as the loss of a critical external resource. Universities respond through four phases (anticipation, coping, adaptation and re-entry; the heavy border marks re-entry, the phase added by this study). Leaders and third-space staff carry out institutional work across the phases, with staff competence development as the outcome. Dashed border: state-run universities as the contrast case. RQ, research question

- **RQ1.** How did leaders of foundation-maintained universities interpret and respond to the exclusion during its anticipation and coping phases (December 2022 to 2024)?
- **RQ2.** How did substitute instruments (Pannónia, HU-rizont and bilateral agreements) reshape the geography and form of internationalisation relative to the Erasmus+ baseline?
- **RQ3.** How was the competence development of academic and administrative staff sustained, displaced or lost while Erasmus+ staff mobility was unavailable?
- **RQ4.** What does re-entry demand of institutions, and which substitution-era practices persist?

3 Methods

3.1 Design

This study uses a qualitative, embedded multiple-case design with one comparison unit. Yin recommends this approach when context and phenomenon intertwine [37]. Within each university, I apply theory-testing process tracing, which follows how causes produce outcomes [38]. Collier adds that careful description of sequence is itself a central contribution of within-case analysis [39]. Four phases order the timeline; re-entry ends. Corvinus, Debrecen and Pécs were sanctioned, and state-run ELTE remained eligible throughout [2, 40].

3.2 Case selection and corpus

Selection was purposive, and variation was deliberate. Corvinus switched first, in 2019; Debrecen later sued [2, 11]. Pécs is a large regional comprehensive university, and its published Pannónia calls document staff mobility rules in unusual detail [35]. ELTE refused conversion, and its eligibility offers a within-country benchmark [2]. The corpus contains public documents exclusively, and Table 1 lists six source families. Because statements conflicted, I treat legal, institutional and programme records as primary evidence and use press reports where no official account exists [41].

Table 1
Document corpus by source family, 15 December 2022 to the data cut-off (1 October 2026); n = 30 documents analysed. The full document log is provided as Online Resource 1 (ESM 1.xlsx)

Source family	Core documents (all public)	RQs served
1 EU legal and policy acts	Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/2506; Commission decisions C(2023) 8999 and C(2024) 9140; COM(2026) 516; Commission joint statement of 26 Jan 2023	1, 4
2 Court records	General Court, Cases T-115/23, T-132/23, T-133/23, T-138/23, T-139/23, T-140/23; press release No 136/26	1, 4
3 Hungarian legislation	Act IX of 2021 (public interest trusts); Act LIII of 2024; Sixteenth Amendment to the Fundamental Law (2026); Act XVIII of 2026 (Omnibus Act)	1, 4
4 Programme documents	Pannónia call and summaries; HU-rizont announcement; Eurydice and Youth Wiki country pages	2, 3
5 Institutional documents	International-office letters and calls (Debrecen open letter, Jan 2023; Pécs staff calls 2025–26; ELTE Erasmus+ staff call, Mar 2025); rector and board statements (Debrecen, Sep 2025)	1–4
6 Statistics and corroboration	Ministry participation figures; press reports, used for dates and quotations	All

3.3 Analysis and reflexivity

Coding followed what the framework predicted. Following Bowen, I skimmed, read and interpreted documents against the phase and actor categories in Table 2 [42]. Evidence then faced hoop tests, which a valid explanation must pass [39]. Because no human participants were involved, formal ethical approval was not required. I research Pécs, where I am a doctoral student. With Berger, I treat that insider position as a resource that demands disciplined reflexivity [43].

Table 2
Coding frame derived from the analytical framework

Dimension	Codes	Theoretical source
Phase	Anticipation; coping; adaptation; re-entry	Duchek [14], extended by this study
Resource response	Political (litigation, lobbying); tie-building (partner conversion, substitute schemes)	Pfeffer and Salancik [25]
Institutional work	Creating; maintaining; disrupting	Lawrence and Suddaby [29]
Actor	Board or rectorate; international office (third space); academic staff; state or Tempus Public Foundation	Whitchurch [30]
Competence outcome	Sustained; displaced; lost (by mobility type, duration, destination)	Erasmus+ impact study [7]; Pavlakis and Comas [18]
Evidence test	Straw in the wind; hoop; smoking gun; doubly decisive	Collier [39]

4 Results

Table 3
Principal documentary evidence by phase

Phase	Date	Document	Case	Response
Anticipation	16 Jan 2023	Open letter to Erasmus partners, Centre for International Relations [40]	Debrecen	Maintaining ties
Anticipation	26 Jan 2023	Commissioners' joint statement on applying the decision [3]	All; ELTE unaffected	—
Coping	2 Mar 2023	Annulment action T-115/23, filed [44]	Debrecen	Political
Coping	20 Dec 2023	Pannónia programme launched, HUF 10 billion [36]	All sanctioned	Substitute scheme
Coping	12 Jan 2024	HU-rizont launched, HUF 8 billion [45]	All sanctioned	Substitute scheme
Adaptation	24 Sep 2024	Partner conversion reported by international head [31]	Corvinus	Partner conversion
Adaptation	Mar 2025	Erasmus+ staff-training call, 2025/26 [46]	ELTE	Continuity
Adaptation	2025	Pannónia staff teaching call, 2–10 days [35]	Pécs	Substitute scheme
Re-entry	3–4 Sep 2026	Government announces Erasmus+ return for 2026/27 [24, 47]	All sanctioned	Renewal
Re-entry	23 Sep 2026	Commission proposes lifting the measures [15]	All sanctioned	—
Re-entry	30 Sep 2026	General Court dismisses six actions [11]	Debrecen and five others	—

4.1 Anticipation and coping, December 2022 to 2024 (RQ1)

The first institutional responses appeared within a month of the Council's decision. Debrecen's international office wrote to partners while uncertainty peaked [40]. Its director promised that teaching and staff-training calls would continue as before through 2023/24 [40]. Because existing agreements stayed valid, previously funded mobility carried on for two more academic years [40]. Brussels clarified the rules; applying remained possible [3]. Affected entities could bid and be evaluated, but no contract could follow [3]. State-run ELTE was untouched; its exchanges proceeded [3, 46].

Ministers left the boards, yet Brussels remained unconvinced [2, 31]. Six universities chose litigation in early 2023, and Debrecen advanced nineteen legal grounds against the Council's undifferentiated collective treatment [11, 44]. It also commissioned PwC, and its foundation's charter changed too [44]. These were political responses, and they directly sought to alter the environment itself [25]. Hungarian learners felt the loss only from September 2024, when outbound Erasmus+ places at model-changing institutions finally ended, according to student representatives [24, 31]. That lag, which grants created, mattered. It gave leaders about twenty-one months of anticipation between the decision and the first lost study semester.

Substitution arrived in December 2023, when Tempus Public Foundation announced Pannónia [36]. Its HUF 10 billion covered students, teachers and staff wherever hosts existed [36]. HU-rizont, which paid foreign partners' research costs, followed soon [45].

4.2 Substitute instruments and the geography of internationalisation (RQ2)

Converting relationships became the central practical task for mobility offices after 2023. Corvinus reported figures that show how the switch progressed [31]. Its international head said that about 60% of partners moved quickly onto Pannónia terms [31]. Another 20% adopted other cooperation forms, while the remainder was still negotiating in September 2024 [31]. Roughly 700 students travelled, yet options narrowed [31]. Some foreign universities declined new arrangements, and opportunities consequently lagged behind Erasmus+ [31]. Grants paid monthly, and amounts varied considerably [36].

Geography widened; Europe lost its former default status. Funding rules reserved a fifth for the world's top 250 universities, and eligible lists ran from Nauru to Afghanistan [36, 48]. Eligibility is not travel, and I located no destination counts. The minister claimed 8,115 first-year participants, but no comparable Erasmus+ statistics were public [34, 41]. Because students, teachers and researchers were counted together, the figure cannot show whether staff mobility grew, held steady or contracted under Pannónia [34, 41]. This gap, which still persists, matters.

ELTE, meanwhile, ran ordinary Erasmus+ staff-training calls for 2025/26, funding two to five grant days within Europe [46]. The contrast shows that eligibility preserved routine continuity inside narrower horizons. Foundation universities, which lost that stability, gained global reach that government designed [36]. Substitution redirected internationalisation, whereas Switzerland's scheme mirrored the original [19].

4.3 Staff competence: sustained, displaced or lost (RQ3)

Staff mobility survived the exclusion on paper throughout the entire substitution period. Pannónia's rules let teachers travel wherever willing hosts agreed [34]. Summaries list training, teaching and research stays, which daily rates of HUF 16,500–70,000 supported [34]. Foreign lecturers could visit Hungarian campuses, which preserved a measure of reciprocity that Turing lacked [5, 34]. Duration limits differed, and comparisons easily mislead. Pécs allowed lecturing visits of 2–10 days, and Erasmus+ formally permits sixty [8, 35]. ELTE funded five maximum; applicants financed extensions [46].

Caps alone prove little, so I examined take-up. Figures merge employees with learners, and available sources never separate teaching, training and research stays by institution or year [34, 41]. Debrecen cites 2,000 affected academics, but eligibility differs from outcome [44]. Competence effects therefore remain undetermined, and claims of loss rest largely on inference. What the documents do show is displacement of form, because lecturing visits now rested on separately negotiated inter-institutional agreements outside Erasmus+ itself [31, 35]. Whether skills grew, records cannot reveal.

The Erasmus+ impact study offers a benchmark for that missing evidence on pedagogy, networking and teaching innovation [7]. Mobile staff invited outside lecturers more often than colleagues who stayed [7]. If Pannónia stays proved shorter or shallower, those gains may have thinned. That question, which interviews could settle, remains genuinely open.

4.4 Re-entry, September 2026 onwards (RQ4)

Re-entry started publicly in early September 2026 on still incomplete legal foundations. The government announced that Erasmus+ would return for 2026/27 [47]. Minister Lannert stated that all 21 affected universities held valid mobility applications for 2026–27 [24]. Partnerships first needed renewal or reactivation, which returned administrative work straight to the international offices [47]. Brussels proposed lifting; the Council meanwhile deliberated [15, 49]. Hungary had removed politicians from boards, and trusts were being wound up [15]. Non-university bodies vanished; academic counterparts follow soon [15].

Courts then added certainty, and a paradox emerged. On 30 September 2026, the General Court deemed the measure entirely financial, and it dismissed all six annulment actions [11]. Academic freedom stood unharmed, and any interference would be justified [11]. The universities lost their lawsuits, yet their sector was already rapidly regaining access. Because the trusts that triggered exclusion were dissolving while judges upheld it, re-entry came from governance reform rather than from legal victory [11, 15]. Hungary complied, although its campuses litigated.

Hungary's return also coincides with British and Swiss association to Erasmus + in 2027 after their long absences [22, 50]. What every returning system now faces is rebuilding damaged partner trust [9]. Corvinus's converted partners show that some substitution-era ties may outlast the suspension [31]. Whether they will, the next academic year should reveal.

5 Discussion

5.1 Re-entry, maintenance and redirection

My findings extend Duchek's resilience model in one specific and testable direction [14]. Her stages end once an organisation adapts after crisis [14]. The Hungarian episode adds a phase that starts when a lost resource becomes available. Re-entry differs from recovery because substitution created ties, routines and expectations that compete with restoration. Pannónia links may persist; Erasmus+ counterparts return. Leaders must therefore decide what to keep, and that selection is strategic. Rebuilding copies the past; reconnection selects instead.

Actors matter too, and offices carried much effort. Debrecen's centre reassured partners within a month, Corvinus's international head managed conversion, and renewal now falls to third-space professionals [30, 31, 40]. Rectors litigated and argued publicly, but coordinators kept relationships alive [44]. Senior-officer research celebrates transformation, yet maintenance labour under exclusion went largely unseen there [32, 33]. Because Lawrence and Suddaby define institutional work broadly, the Hungarian case shows how quietly its maintaining form operates when everything seems uncertain [29]. Upkeep, which nobody announces, sustains continuity.

Substitution by redirection forms a third contribution beside re-entry and everyday maintenance within the growing internationalisation literature. Switzerland built SEMP to mirror Erasmus+, whereas Hungary designed worldwide reach [19, 36]. Britain's Turing scheme also looked globally, although it funded only outbound journeys [5]. Pannónia went further, since foreign teachers could also come [34].

5.2 Implications and limitations

Three practical implications follow for university leaders facing any future programme exclusion. First, offices need mandates before relationships start to fray. Second, staff mobility data should separate employees from students, so competence effects become visible. Third, re-entry plans should formally name which substitution-era partners deserve keeping once European programmes reopen. Policymakers also learn something; sanctions travel downward. A measure aimed at boards reached lecturers, and learners bore real costs [9, 31]. Conditionality worked, yet collateral damage clearly remained [15].

This study has limits, and I name four. Evidence is documentary, and interviews with vice-rectors or international officers could still overturn several publicly grounded interpretations offered here. Press reports supplied quotations, and some claims rest on them. My position at Pécs creates insider knowledge, and it also brings obvious risks [43]. Finally, because the Council's decision was pending at the data cut-off, re-entry findings describe an unfolding process, not yet a settled outcome. Fieldwork, which needs ethics approval, follows.

Researchers should compare Hungarian, British and Swiss re-entry using shared indicators of partnership survival and staff mobility. It would show whether redirection outlasts the conditions that produced it. Leaders who survived exclusion may then judge which improvisations deserve institutional permanence. That judgement, which evidence should inform, belongs to them.

6 Conclusion

Hungary's foundation universities experienced a penalty unlike any earlier European programme exclusion. Eligibility followed governance form, which made state peers comparators. Leaders anticipated early, because existing grants bought roughly twenty-one months before student exchange stopped. When substitution came, international offices converted partners while rectors pursued courts, audits and charter changes. Pannónia widened reach, but data stayed thin. Staff mobility continued under altered rules, and its competence effects remain unmeasured. Judges upheld sanctions; reform is undoing them.

Theory gains a phase, and practice receives warnings. Re-entry merits its own place in resilience models, and third-space professionals need fuller recognition as custodians of partnership continuity. Ministries should publish staff data, and universities should protect training. Brussels might also weigh collateral harm, for lecturers and learners bore unchosen costs. Because Britain and Switzerland are re-associating in 2027 as well, the coming years offer a natural comparison of how excluded systems reconnect. I hope others take that up.

For now, the Hungarian record shows leadership under exclusion as patient, distributed and largely invisible maintenance work. Such effort deserves study before another suspension makes it urgent again. Universities that prepare early will lose far less when access next disappears. Their academics, whom sanctions touched first, deserve that foresight.

Declarations

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Competing interests The author declares no competing interests.

Ethics approval and consent to participate Not applicable. The study analyses only publicly available documents: EU legal acts, court records, Hungarian legislation, programme calls, institutional documents and press reports. It involved no human participants, interviews, surveys or personal data.

Consent for publication Not applicable.

Data availability All data analysed in this study are publicly available documents, accessible directly at the following links. Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/2506: http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec_impl/2022/2506/oj. Commission joint statement of 26 January 2023: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/node/4536. General Court press release No 136/26: https://curia.europa.eu/site/upload/docs/application/pdf/2026-09/cp260136en.pdf. University of Debrecen open letter to Erasmus partners: https://internationaloffice.unideb.hu/node/142. University of Debrecen lawsuit statement: https://alumni.edu.unideb.hu/news/2825186. Eötvös Loránd University Erasmus+ staff call 2025/26: https://elte.hu/dstore/document/13309/Erasmus_nem_oktatasi_celu_felhivas_2025_palyazat.pdf. University of Pécs Pannónia staff call

2025/26: https://mobilitas.pte.hu/sites/mobilitas.pte.hu/files/documents/ajk_oktatoi_pannonia_felhivas_2025_szeptember_1_december_19.docx. Youth Wiki Hungary 6.5: https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/hungary/65-cross-border-learning-mobility. Eurydice Hungary 12.2: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/hungary/mobility-higher-education. The complete log of all 30 documents, with a direct link for each, is openly available in Figshare at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.34623153 and is also provided as Online Resource 1 (ESM 1.xlsx); full details appear in the reference list.

Author contributions M.Z.A. is the sole author. He conceived the study, designed the methodology, collected the documents, verified the analysis, revised the manuscript and approved the final version.

Use of generative AI During the preparation of this work the author used Claude (Anthropic) to search for and verify literature and official documents, to check references against primary sources, to generate draft text for all sections and to build the document log template. The author directed the drafting, verified every source and citation, revised the text and takes full responsibility for the published article.

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Figures

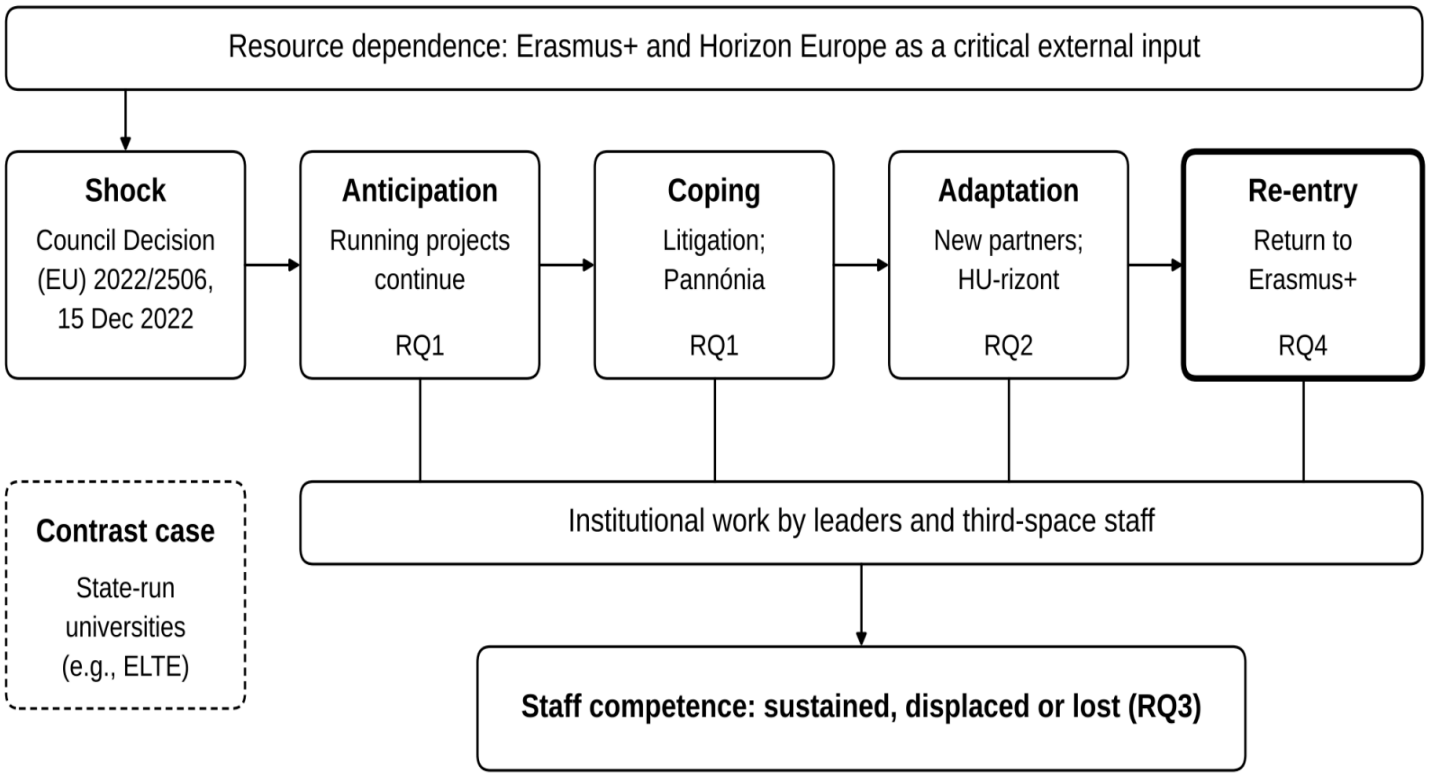


Figure 1

Analytical framework.

Supplementary Files

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- ESM1.xlsx
- Dataavailabilitystatement.txt