

Student Exchanges in Times of Crisis

Research report on the impact of COVID-19
on student exchanges in Europe



Erasmus Student Network

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Title: Student Exchanges in Times of Crisis

Research report on the impact of COVID-19 on student exchanges in Europe

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FOREWORD

One month after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, the virus continues to cause a major disruption in every spectrum of our society. The Erasmus Student Network felt the obligation to take drastic measures and act fast in order to respond to the challenges that international students and their Higher Education Institutions are facing due to the outbreak. With a presence in 42 countries and in 1.000 Higher Education Institutions, our ESN volunteers from the first moment stood next to the international students offering peer to peer support on a daily basis. Having direct contact with international students we were able to hear their concerns on a European-wide level and advocate for their needs to decision-makers.

In order to maximize our efforts and provide better support to the international students and decision-makers in the field of Higher Education, we decided to launch a European-wide survey to understand the student sentiment and provide data-driven evidence. In the end of this report we have listed several recommendations and we call on all the relevant authorities to take them into consideration to help the students in any way possible.

In this difficult and unprecedented situation Erasmus Student Network wants to reassure the international students that we will be next to them providing the best support that we can offer, as we have done for more than 30 years now. We would like to thank all the ESN volunteers across Europe who supported us in promoting the survey, the survey team which dedicated countless of hours analysing the large amount of data, all those who provided feedback in order to have this report and, above all, the students who despite the challenging situation found the time to answer the questionnaire.

Kostis Giannidis

President of the Erasmus Student Network

INTRODUCTION TO ESN

The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is one of the biggest European student organisations acting in the field of student mobility and internalisation of higher education. ESN is a non-profit organisation of more than 530 local sections in 42 countries in more than 1,000 Higher Education Institutions, gathering 15,000 volunteers. ESN provides support services to over 350,000 international students and works for their needs by facilitating their mobility period, ensuring social cohesion, reintegration and by enhancing intercultural awareness and active citizenship.

ESN further works in the interest of international students by improving the conditions of student learning mobility (integration, advocacy on vertical levels, provision of information, evaluation of mobility programmes, promotion, motivation and preparation) and by enhancing internationalisation, intercultural understanding and active participation in Europe.

For more information, see esn.org.

SUMMARY AND MAIN FINDINGS

This research report builds on a survey that was open from the 19th to the 30th of March 2020 and addresses the topic of **student exchanges in Europe affected by the COVID-19 crisis**. It gathered **21,930 responses** from international students all over Europe.

Almost two thirds of the students' mobility periods continued. A quarter of them were **cancelled**.

The proportion of students who have **stayed in their exchange destination decreased** slowly during the time that the survey was open.

37,5% of the students experienced at least one major problem related to their exchange. The most common one was related to the **loss of transportation to return home**, followed by **problems with accommodation** and **problems with access to basic needs** such as food and sanitary products.

24% of Italian students and 19% of Asian students have experienced **discrimination based on their nationalities**, either to a great extent or to a very great extent.

7% of the students reported that they will **not get any grant at all for their studies**. 24% reported that they will keep the grant, partially or fully. The majority of the students do not know what will happen to their grants.

Half of the students whose mobility continued have **moved to online classes**. 34% of them have moved to partial online or partially postponed classes.

Three-quarters of the students whose mobilities were cancelled got **support from their home universities**. The most common form was support with course schedules and the academic programme.

METHODOLOGY

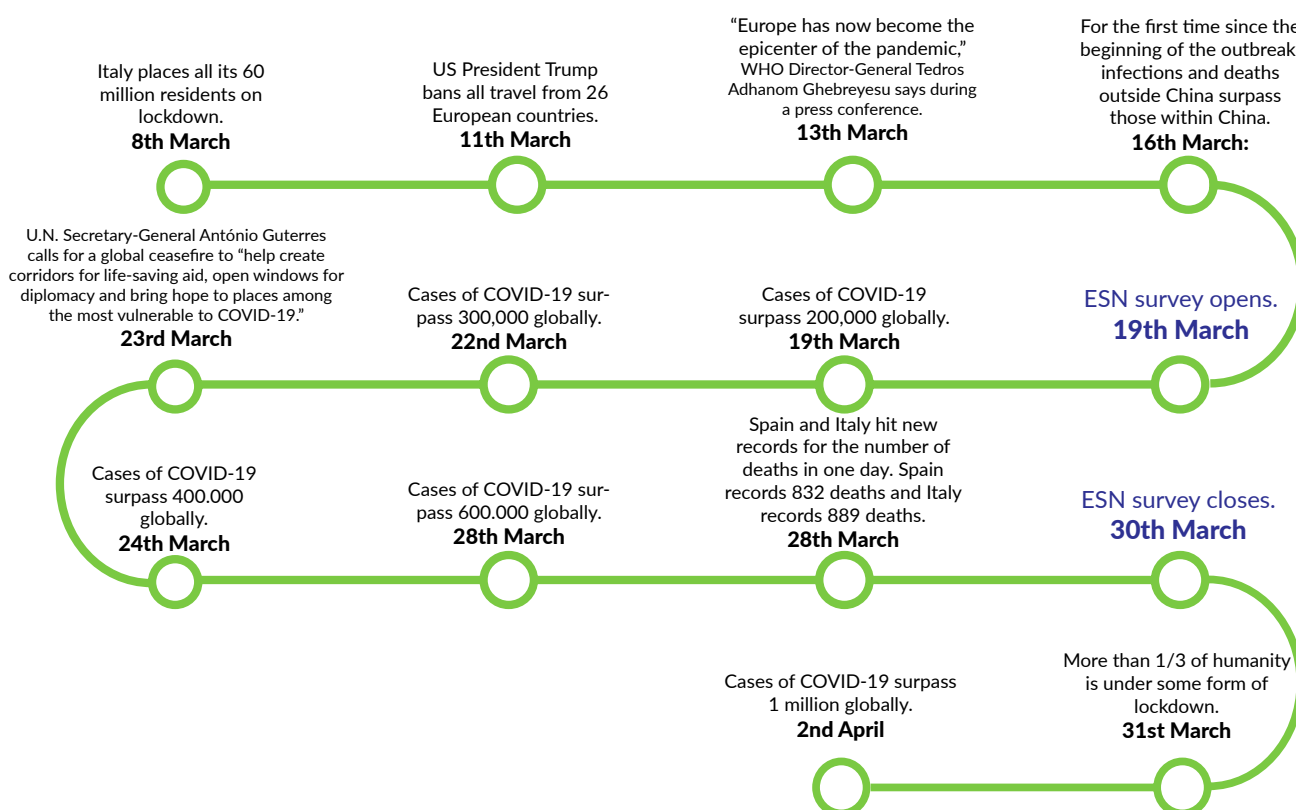
Overview

The aim of this study was to capture the experiences of higher education students and trainees across Europe regarding the impact of COVID-19 on their mobility experience. It further aims to support policy-makers to make evidence-based decisions and alter communication in order to answer the major challenges students face during their exchange in foreign countries, allowing the Erasmus Student Network to do data-driven student representation.

The research focuses on international exchange students who either were abroad during the spring of 2020, or who were supposed to be on an exchange but had their studies interrupted. 97.0% of the 21,930 respondents are students that are on exchange for the spring semester of 2020 (14,053; 64.1%) or the full academic year 2019-2020 (7,210; 32.9%). 2.4% of respondents are students that plan to start their exchange during summer or fall 2020 and see their exchange threatened by the impact of COVID-19.

Timeline

The survey was open from the 19th to the 30th of March 2020. This was a turbulent time in Europe and the world, where updates were published almost daily. The timeline below can hopefully give the reader an idea of the timing of the survey.



Data overview

After data cleansing (for example, deleting duplicates) we had a total of 21,930 answers. Students of 125 nationalities responded to the survey, including several non-EU countries and Erasmus+ partner countries. Out of the total student responses, 81.2% of respondents were EU nationals from one of the 27 member states of the European Union, and thus 18.8% were non-EU nationals, the largest groups of which were nationals of Turkey, Serbia, Norway, the United Kingdom, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, Ukraine and the United States of America.

Given that Turkey, Serbia, Norway and the United Kingdom are part of the Erasmus+ Programme, this can explain their higher number in participation. The vast majority of respondents (89.7%) are students studying their full degree in one of the 34 Erasmus+ Programme countries, while 10.3% of respondents are students coming from Erasmus+ partner countries. Spain (4,242 respondents), Italy (2,420), Germany (2,354), Portugal (1,650) and France (1,588) are the most commonly reported countries of origin of the sending institution. The top 10 countries account for 73.9% of the respondents, but more than 100 responses were received per country from an additional 19 countries.

Respondents went on exchange to more than 90 different countries, with 96.9% of respondents being on exchange in Erasmus+ Programme countries and 98.8% of respondents going to one of the 42 countries where the Erasmus Student Network is present and actively supports international exchange students. Here again, Spain (3,978 respondents), Italy (2,091), Germany (2,309) and Portugal (2,433) were the most reported countries of destination. Poland replaces France to complete the top 5 with 1,143 respondents. Overall, the respondents breakdown is in line with the outbound student mobility within Erasmus+¹.

The vast majority of respondents were active on exchange through the Erasmus+ Programme, with 93.7% reporting this option. According to the Education and Training Monitor 2019, around 50% of European students on credit mobility did so through Erasmus+ or other European funding programmes². The higher answer rate can likely be explained by a higher answer rate of countries with a bigger percentage taking part in Erasmus+ mobilities compared to the European average (Spain, Italy, Portugal), the fact that short term mobilities are included in the Education and Training Monitor (while less reported in our survey) and the nature of ESN and its strong ties to the Erasmus+ Programme.

1 Based on Annex 14 of the statistical annex of the Erasmus+ Programme - Annual Report 2018, the latest year for which complete information is available.

2 European Union 2019: Education and Training Monitor, p. 78. available [here](#).

Of the total respondents, 76% are on Erasmus+ student mobility, 10.7% on an Erasmus+ traineeship and 6.8% on an International Credit Mobility through the Erasmus+ Programme. Other student exchanges account for 4.7% of the mobilities, while 1.5% are accounted for by the Swiss-European Mobility Programme.

When comparing the different mobility programmes among EU nationals versus non-EU nationals, we can see that their participation in Erasmus+ is even higher (97.2%), with 84.2% of EU nationals taking part in Erasmus+ student mobility and 12.1% taking part in an Erasmus+ traineeship. Non-EU nationals had a different mobility breakdown, with 40.6% of respondents taking part in Erasmus+ student mobility, 32.2% taking part in Erasmus+ International Credit mobility and 4.9% taking part in an Erasmus+ traineeship. Other types of student mobility are also more common here with 17.5%.

Roughly 70% of all other student exchange programmes are thus being reported by non-EU nationals.

Survey methods and gathering responses

The survey contained mainly closed questions and used rating scales to enable the analysis of the impact of different activities and interventions during the outbreak. The survey also utilised open-ended questions to provide space for students to respond in detail on key issues.

The responses were all gathered online. The survey was disseminated to international students and trainees all over Europe and ESN volunteers encouraged the students/trainees to fill it in and to share it as widely as possible. It was promoted on several of ESN's main communication channels, including Facebook and Twitter. It was also shared and promoted by various institutions such as the European Commission, National Agencies, university networks and individual universities.

Limitations

The survey responses represent an incomplete population during a limited time period. As mentioned above, the country breakdown of our survey is roughly in line with that of the Erasmus+ Programme, but the representation across countries is unlikely to be perfect.

The survey was largely disseminated by ESN communication channels. This means that there is a potential for selection bias; perhaps respondents are likely to be students who have had previous engagement with ESN and so responses may not

be fully representative of the overall mobile student population. Finally, there are many factors that potentially could have influenced the responses, outside of COVID-19.

IMPACT ON EXCHANGE & EXPERIENCES

As displayed in figure 1, close to 65% of the students reported that their mobility continued, out of which 62.3% reported the mobility was continued and 2.4% explicitly mentioned their mobility was continued with restrictions such as through online courses. For 25% of the respondents, the mobility was cancelled, either by themselves, by their sending university, by their hosting university or by someone else (national authorities, both universities...). This number includes mobilities that are temporarily cancelled, postponed to the next semester, or were reported as cancelled in any other form. 5% of respondents were unsure what was going to happen and the remaining 5.6% indicated another impact on their mobility experience.

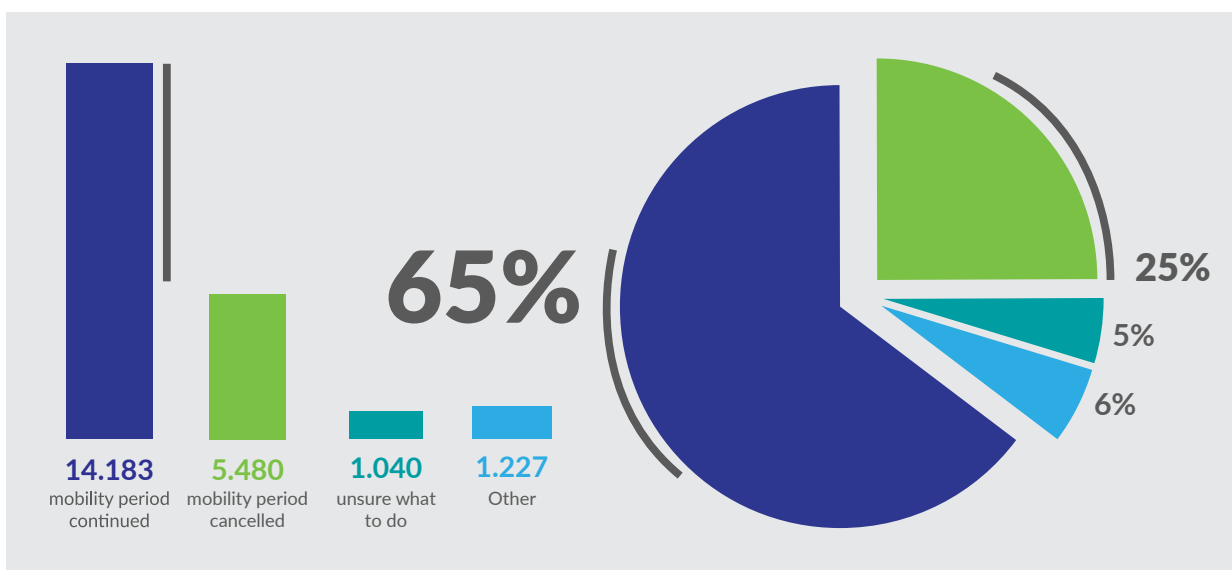


Figure 1 - Effect on mobility

When it comes to their physical whereabouts, figure 2 shows that 50.5% of respondents reported that they are in their exchange destination at the moment of completing the survey. 41.8% decided to stay in their exchange destination and 40% decided to return home, while 5.2% were undecided at the moment of completing the survey, 3.6% indicated that they were stuck and unable to return home. 7.8% of the respondents said that they were unable to start their exchange, which includes 187 respondents that are unable to start their second semester abroad, as they were on exchange also in the first semester.

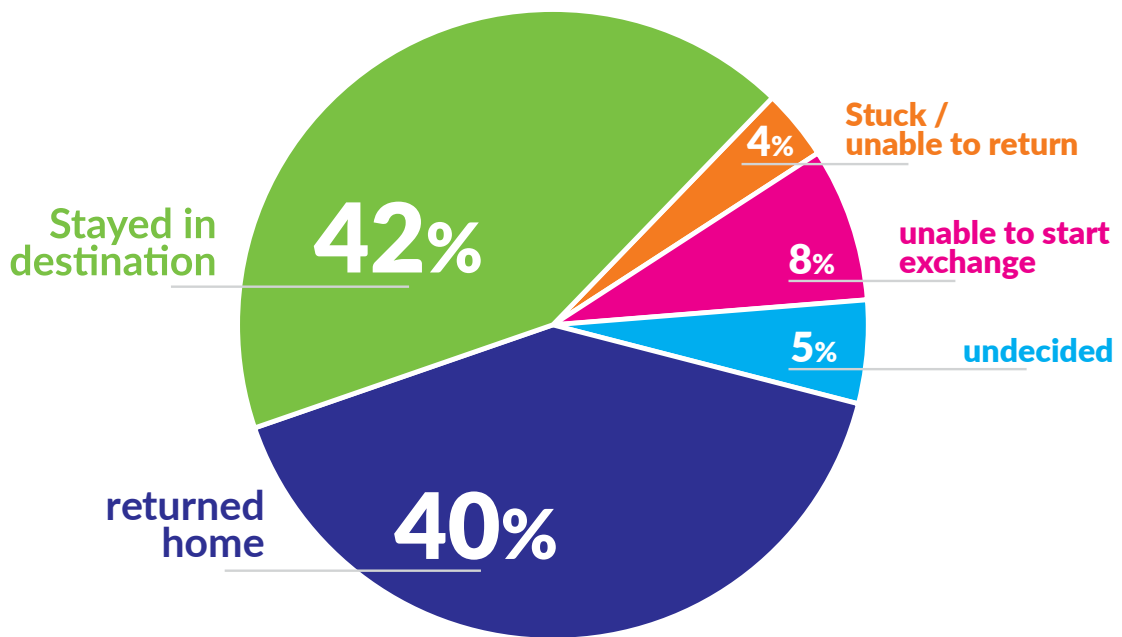


Figure 2 - physical whereabouts of the student

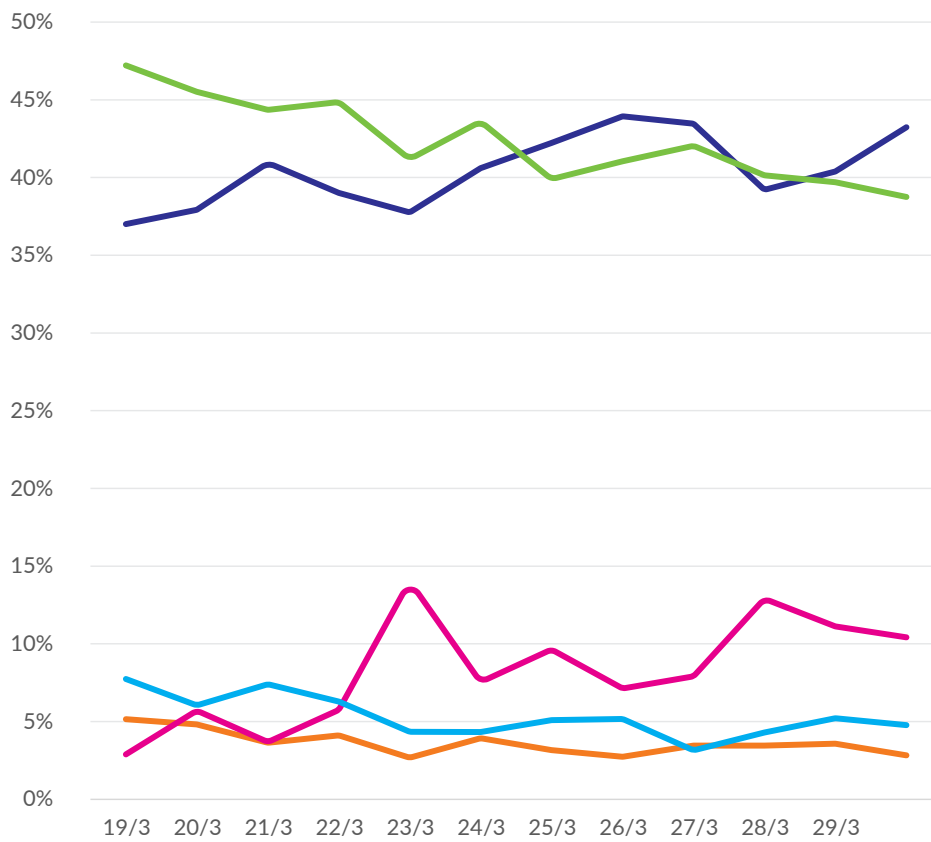


Figure 3 - physical whereabouts of the students over time

Throughout the duration of the survey, certain trends were slowly emerging. The amount of students that have stayed in their exchange destination has decreased. On the first day of the data collection, 47.2% of respondents indicated they were staying, at the end of the survey this had dropped to 38.8%, a drop of nearly 8.5 percentage points. On the other hand, the amount of students indicating they returned home increased from 37% on the 19th of March to 43.2% of respondents on the 30th of March 2020. The amount of undecided decreased from 7.7% on March 19th to 4.8% on March 30th, indicating that more students came to a decision, meaning that the longer the crisis lasted, the more students decided on a course of action. Fortunately, the amount of students stuck in their exchange

“It’s very hard to take actions in any direction, because it’s still unclear under which conditions the semester will continue and the in which form the exams will take place.”
 - German student on mobility in Italy

destination, unable to return to their home country also decreased from 5.2% to 2.8% of the respondents, which indicates that more students had issues resolved by the 30th of March 2020. Overall, this indicates that this crisis had a very disruptive effect on the mobility of the students, throughout the response period and it is likely even more students will return home over time.

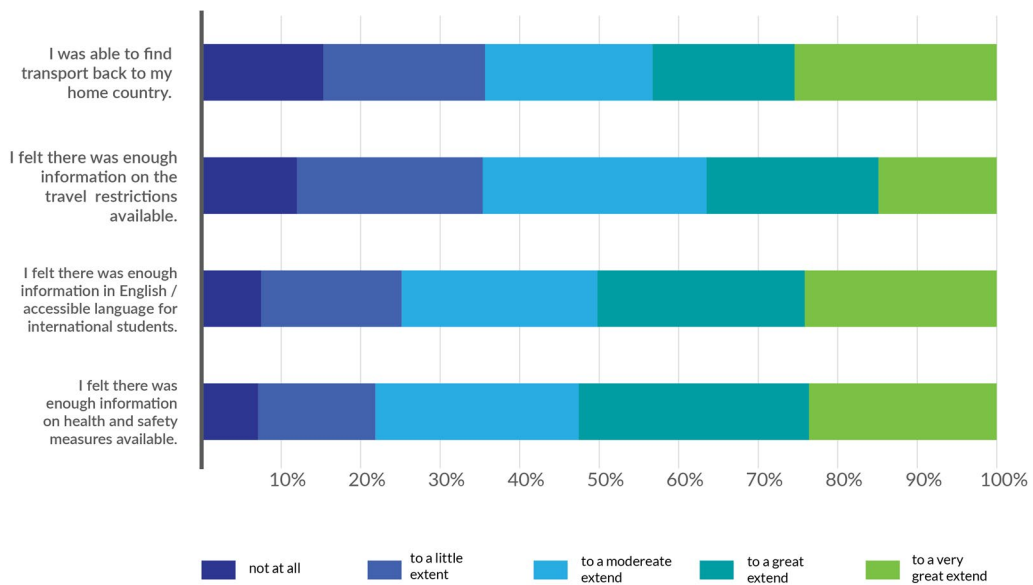


Figure 4 - accessible information for the student

Respondents were asked to what extent they felt there was enough information available on health and safety measures; overall, 78.1% of respondents answered positively to this statement (n = 21,449), with 25.6% indicating this was the case to a moderate extent, while 52.5% of respondents answered that this applied to them to a great extent or a very great extent.

50.2% of respondents answered positively that there was sufficient information about the COVID-19 outbreak available in English or another accessible language available for international students (n = 20,891); 24.6% said this was the case to a moderate extent. 7.5% said this was not at all the case and 17.7% indicated there was very little information available in a language that was accessible to them.

COVID-19 had a big impact on the possibility of people to travel freely across Europe, as many countries issued travel restrictions. Out of 21,291 respondents, 12.0% said that not enough information was available on this topic, while 23.3% felt this was available to a little extent. 28.1% that this was the case to a moderate extent; this statement was the least positive, as only 36.5% considered this was the case to a great extent and to a very great extent. 43.3% of respondents (n=16,276) said that they were able to find transport back to their home country to a great extent (17.8%) or a very great extent (25.4%), while 15.3% indicated this was not at all the case and 20.3% that this was the case to a very little extent. Over

“My host University communicated a lot in Portuguese, which I couldn’t understand.”

- Dutch student on mobility in Portugal

“Every store has its own regulations which are never written down in English, so people start to get rude if we don’t follow the rules, we don’t know about and people do not or can not translate the rules. It is really uncomfortable and makes me not want go to the stores”

- German student on mobility in Poland

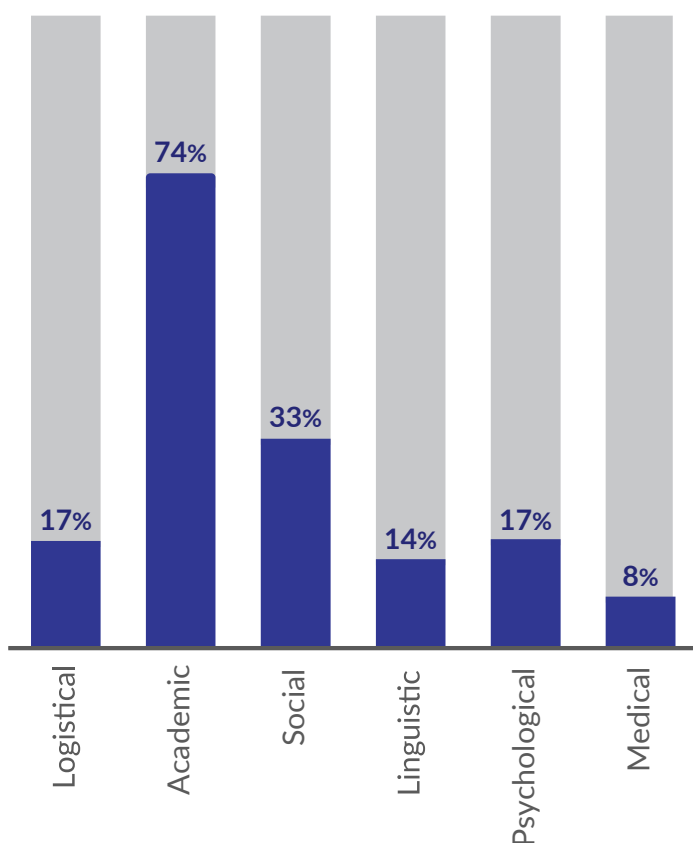


Figure 5 - overall support received by students

5,654 respondents indicated that this was not applicable for them, mostly reflecting students who decided to stay in their exchange destination. The students were offered many types of support. Approximately three-quarters of the respondents (74.4%) said that they received academic support, which was followed by “Social support” (32.8%), “Psychological support” (17.1%), “Logistical support” (16.8%) “Linguistic support” (14.0%) and “Medical support”

(8.1%). 14.7% reported that they did not receive any support at all (figure 5, n = 21,930).

As to who offered the above-mentioned support to the students, the most common response was support by “Family and/or friends” (68.7%), followed by “Host university”, (58.0%) and “Home university” (44.6%). This indicates that quite a large group of students did not feel supported by their host (42.0%) and home university (55.5%). Further down the list, we see that students also received support from other sources such as “Student organisations” (24.8%) and in few cases from “Local services” such as police, medical centres or local authorities (4.9%) and “Workplace” (3.9%) (n=21,930).

The students reported a diverse range of satisfaction with the information that they were provided by their host universities, these results are depicted in figure 6. There were two sets of instructions that they found particularly useful; the first being the “Health measures to be taken” is something that almost half of

“I want to thank the university and ESN here because they’ve always been there, (...) it’s the people that embody the organisations that have been considering how we’ve been feeling or what problems we could have. That’s beautiful and so nice, because after all we are far away from our families and this is our family here.”

- Spanish student on mobility in Germany

the students (47.8%) found either very useful or extremely useful, with another 31.0% indicating they felt the information was somewhat useful. The second part was the “Impact on working methods of student services offered by the university”, which 46.6% of the students found either very useful or extremely useful, with another 25.9% indicating the information was somewhat useful.

The fact that students were relatively satisfied with the health-related information may not be a coincidence; another recent study by the European Association for International Education (EAIE) showed that university staff focused the COVID-19 communication on providing travel/mobility-related information and information on health and safety issues. It should be noted that the EAIE study focused on student support in general, not international exchange students in particular³. At the other end of the spectrum, there were two issues standing out as much less appreciated by the students. “Travel instructions for exchange students” was seen as not useful at all or slightly useful by 45.9%, while 11.3% indicated they did not receive this information. The information about “Impact on student accommodation” was seen as not at all or slightly useful by almost half of the respondents who were provided with this information (48.2%), while 23.3% indicated they did not receive this information.

³ Rumbley (2020), p. 8.

The information about “Impact on student accommodation” was seen as not at all or slightly useful by almost half of the respondents who were provided with this information (48.2%), while 23.3% indicated they did not receive this information. Problems with cancelled accommodation were reported by 1,260 students in total (see “Major problems encountered by students” in Figure 6.).

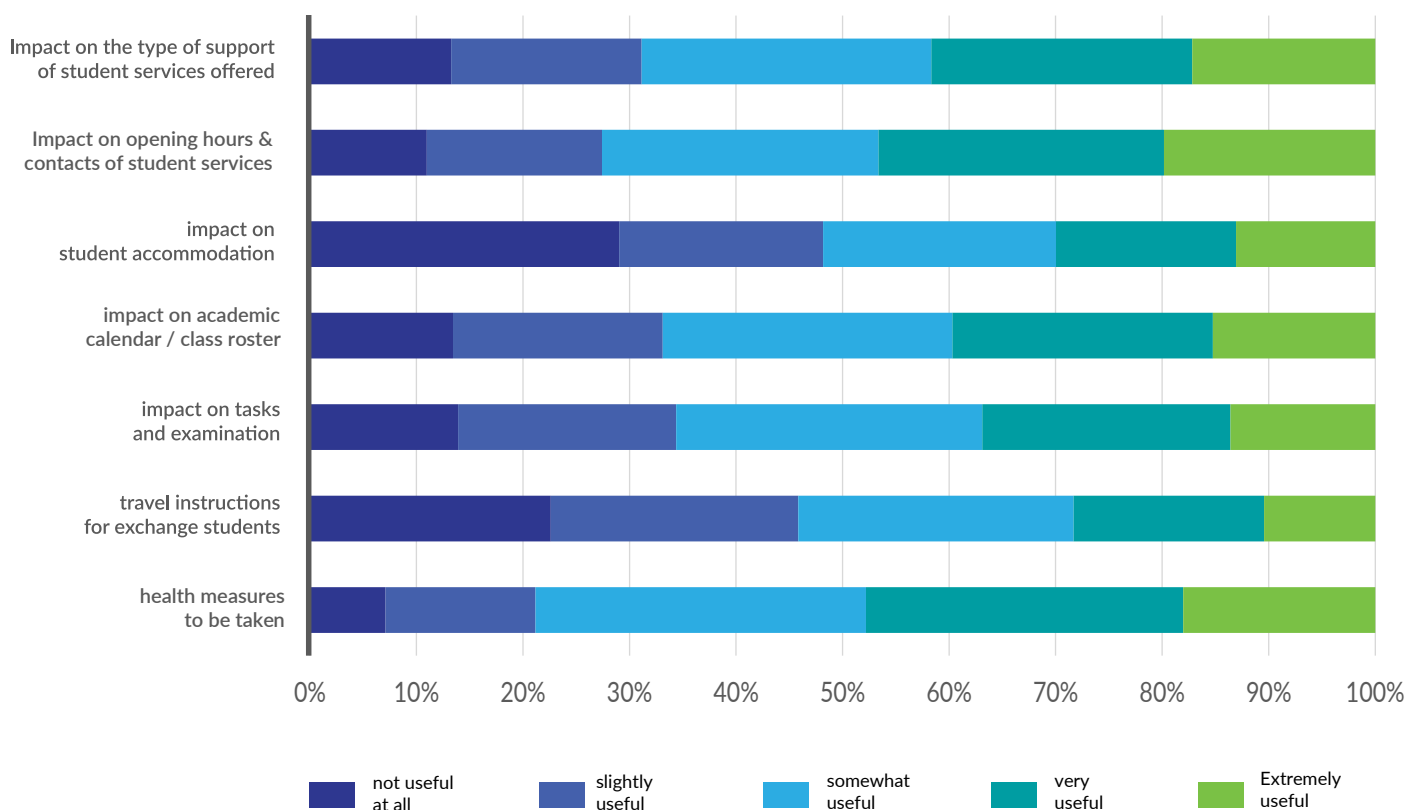


Figure 6 - usefulness of information provided by host university

Three-quarters of the students whose mobilities were cancelled said that they got some form of support from their home universities, while one quarter indicated they did not receive support from their home institution (figure 7). The most common support was “Support with course schedule / academic programme upon return home” (30%), followed by “Support with arranging the return home” (19%) and “Support with mental health and well-being” (12%). For almost a third of the students (32%), the support measures offered by their universities were still unclear and they were in contact with their universities/authorities to determine the type of support they could expect.

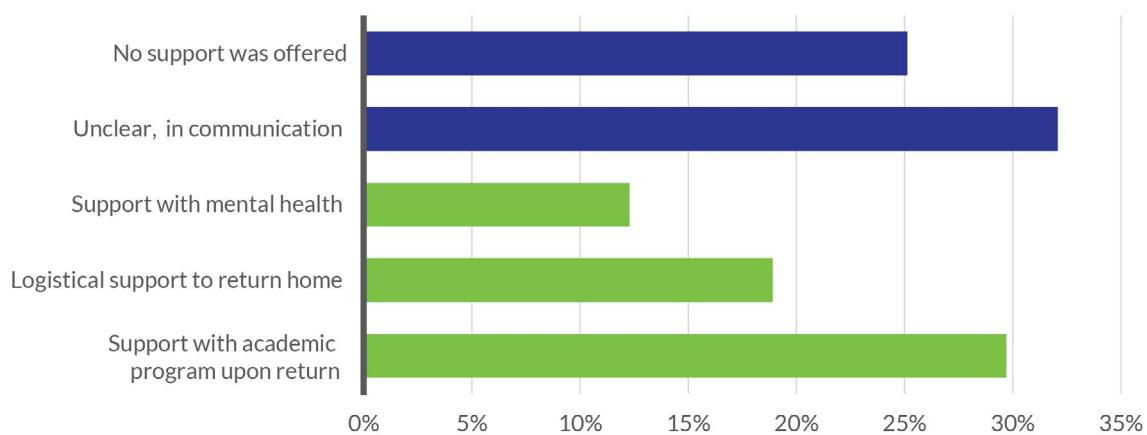


Figure 7 - support offered by home university

Impact on class schedule

Out of the 17,125 students who responded to the question on the impact of their course schedule, only 5% of them said that the classes continued as normal. 9% reported that the classes were cancelled/postponed with no online offer available. A great majority have moved on to some kind of online classes instead: 51% to full online offers and 34% to partial online offers or partially postponed classes.

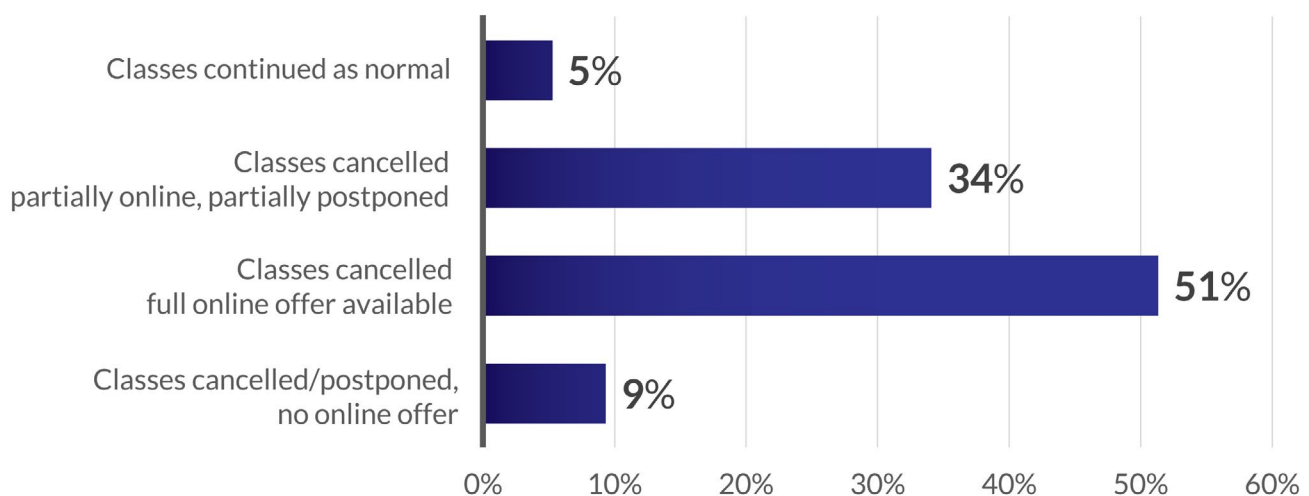


Figure 8 - impact on class schedule

Several problems were reported with technical issues, insufficiently prepared teachers and time difference (the time difference was pointed out by a student from Japan), and while these can probably be worked around somehow, the real “Erasmus experience” is unlikely to be the same. One student wrote *“The online classes are a solution but they are not the same as classic style classes. I feel that I am wasting my mobility following these classes and not able to travel”*. Another wrote *“One of the most important reason for me to attend this Erasmus program was to find new friends around the world and socialize with them. But, due to isolation, i cannot do that now. I am very disappointed and because of that I feel very depressed.”*

Financial impact

When taking part in an international mobility period, Erasmus students receive a grant to cover extra expenses during their stay abroad. Previous research has shown that the grant covers half of the expenses abroad or less for almost 70% of the students⁴. How to deal with the financial implications of cancelled/interrupted mobilities is therefore an important question. This was investigated in the next question, which was completed only by those who indicated that their mobilities were cancelled (figure 9, n=4,664).

The most important finding here is that a great majority, almost two thirds, of the students do not yet know what will happen with their grants. They indicated this was still unclear, as they were still in communication with their universities or national authorities. This also includes answers indicating uncertainty mentioning something like “Maybe I will have to...”, “It might be the case that...”, “I will try to...” or something similar.



Figure 9 - financial impact for students with cancelled mobilities

A little over 13% of the students replied that they will be able to keep the grant for the period they were abroad, ending their financial support on their return date and another 11% replied that they will be able to keep the full amount. Only 7% replied that they will not be able to keep any part of the grant at all, having to return the financial support due to the cancellation of their mobility. Some replied that they can keep the grants under certain conditions, or that their mobility was interrupted before the grant was paid out or their mobility agreement was signed.

Many students expressed a worry that some of their costs have already incurred and that it will be difficult to get that money back.

Considering the fact that many HEIs and National Agencies were not prepared

“The main problem that is created is the financial aspect of ending the mobility. I’ve received information from my sending institution that I’d have to return all the scholarship. However I had expenses for the accommodation, food and transport here.”

- Bulgarian trainee

⁴ Josek et. al. (2017), p. 22.

for the rapid changes that occurred, the large number of “Unclears” is rather understandable. Little change was reported between the first half that the survey was open (64.3% between 19th-24th March), compared to the second half (61.9% between 25th-30th March), with a difference of only 2.4 percentage points. This suggests that the information available did not change significantly during the survey period.

Major problems encountered by students

Regarding the problems that the students encountered, 62.5% did not experience any of the problems mentioned in the graph below. However, as shown in figure 10, 37.5% said that they experienced at least one of the following problems. The most common one was related to the loss of transportation to return home (6,132), but there were also many students with problems related to cancelled accommodation (1,260) or problems with access to basic needs such as food and sanitary products (1,430). Problems with access to medical support (795) and visa and residence permits (287) were much less frequent. Four poor souls reported having all of these five problems.

“I strongly believe that we should not be asked to return the scholarship, as ending the mobility was something completely out of the students’ hands. Anyway the scholarship offered is not covering the costs of living abroad (in my case, it barely covered the cost of the rent).”

- Romanian student in Belgium

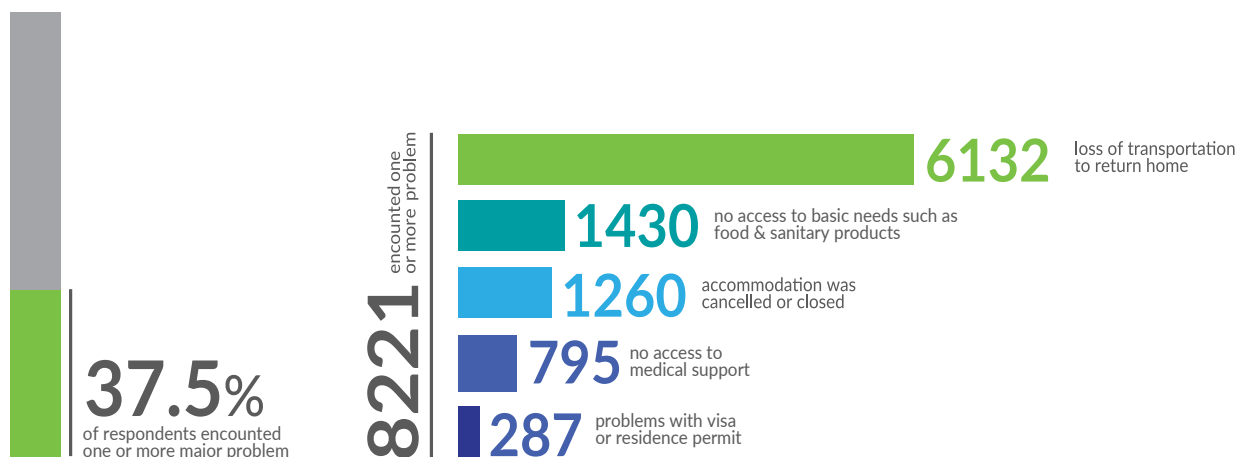


Figure 10 - major problems encountered by students

“I bought 3 flight tickets which were very expensive and 2 of them have been canceled.”

- Turkish trainee in Germany

Even though the overall number was small, the problem of visas and residence permits were, unsurprisingly, disproportionately affecting non-EU nationals. 3.6% of the non-EU nationals had a problem with this, but only 0.6% of EU nationals. The students with the biggest problem in this regard were those from Turkey (27), Brazil (14), Ukraine (11) and Russia (10).

“I am unable to leave because I may not be able to return given that the migration office is not accepting anyone to apply for a resident permit for now. I only have my blue slip which is now expired.”

- Nigerian studying in Spain on mobility in Cyprus

“My home country closed the border in 2 days and I needed to borrow money to buy flight tickets home, because one flight was canceled, and the available tickets were crazy expensive.”

- Latvian student on mobility in Portugal

Health & well-being

It is not difficult to understand the anxiety and stress that comes with not knowing what will happen with one's exchange semester. Overall, 41.2% of the respondents reported that they had experienced anxiety and stress to a great extent or to a very great extent, during the last two weeks (figure 11). There was a big difference in responses here depending on the status of the exchanges. Of those who had not been able to start their exchanges, 31.4% reported that they had experienced anxiety and stress to a great extent or to a very great extent and for those who had stayed in the exchange destination the number was 30.6%. In contrast, for those who had not decided whether to stay or return, the number was 47.5% and for those who had returned to their home countries it was 47.4%.

The higher numbers for the last two groups is perhaps rather logical. Those who had not yet decided might feel additional stress as a result of not knowing what will happen with their exchange and those who had returned home might experience stress related to the cancelled mobility, not knowing what will

“When you go home, you just feel like a loser because others are staying. My family obligated me to come home, even though I did not wanted to go. I felt like I was giving up and especially now in the Netherlands, I am likes was this it, was this my study abroad... I wish I could do it all over again or at least given the chance.”

- Dutch student on mobility in Norway

happen with the courses, the financial implications and dealing with the return home in a time of crisis. A German student in Spain remarked “My only problem was to decide whether I will stay in my host country or return back home. This has been probably the hardest decision to take during my whole exchange period”.

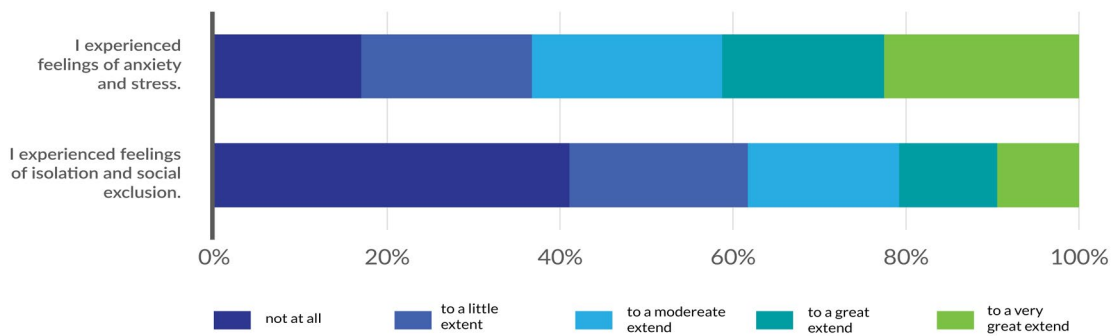


Figure 11 - feelings of anxiety and isolation in the past 2 week

Many students also expressed feelings of anxiety and stress. They also had, to a smaller extent, feelings of isolation and social exclusion. 41.2% said that they felt anxiety and stress to a great extent or to a very great extent. The corresponding number for isolation and social exclusion was 20.8%.

Racism and discrimination

Around 6% of all the respondents reported that they experienced discrimination based on their nationalities, either to a great extent or to a very great extent (figure 12). There were very large variations in this group, with as much as 24% of Italian students and 19% of Asian students. With 2,431 Italian students and 657 Asian students in total, these numbers are too big to be just statistical noise and are therefore very worrying.

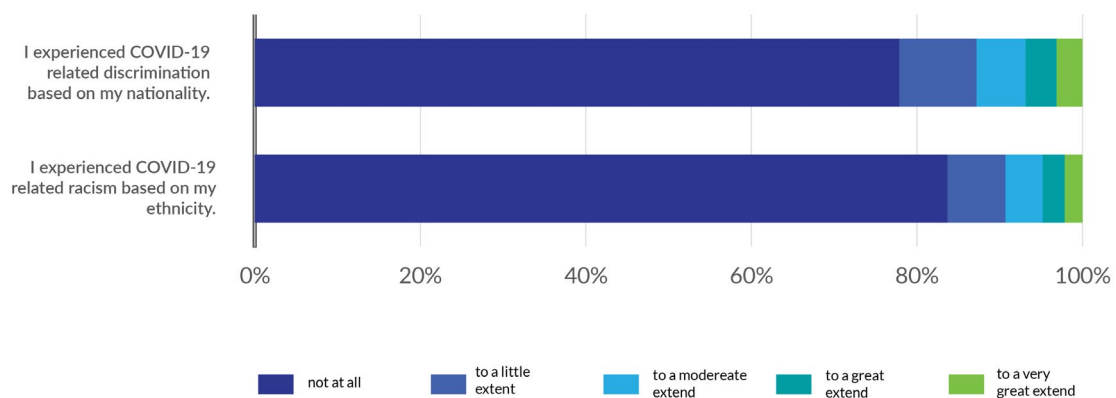


Figure 12 - feelings of discrimination and racism in the past 2 weeks

Similarly, Asian students seem to be disproportionately affected by racism based on their ethnicity; 21.2% compared to 4.3% of all students.

It is probably not too far-fetched to guess that these disproportionately high numbers have to do with the fact that the virus started in Asia and that Italy was the first European nation to be hit very hard by the spread of the virus.

“In these two weeks I always felt like somebody watching me, as if I were Corona infected person just because I’m Asian. I was sprayed disinfection sprays at station, which made me really sad feeling.”

- Japanese exchange student

“One thing that struck me very much was the fact that one day I entered the classroom and my teacher didn’t let me sit down, but she immediately moved away, because I am Italian and according to her I could have had the virus. I didn’t cough or have a fever. Besides, I hadn’t been back in Italy for 4 months.”

- Italian student on mobility in Portugal

WHAT WE LEARNED

First conclusions and recommendations

This research presents a snapshot in time and **the perspective of students in the midst of the crisis situation**.

Emergency response generally targets the majority population, it is important to reflect on the emergency responses that were in place and the specific effect this has on the international and exchange student population, as these make out a significant minority population on university campuses across Europe.

This study shows clear trends that can help institutions, national authorities and the European Commission improve their communication to their respective international student population.

Information provision & support measures

The majority of students indicated that information provision was in place, with a majority of students receiving information about academic impact (class roster and examination), health and safety measures to take or the impact on the student services provided to students. However, given that the information in general was considered to be very useful or extremely useful by the 38.7% of respondents, the information was not always considered that useful for students. We acknowledge the changing nature of the crisis situation makes it difficult for governments, Erasmus+ National Agencies and HEIs to consistently provide exchange students with reliable information. We would nevertheless stress that this is a crucial piece of the puzzle for international students and that they need to be able to get reliable information which is not contradicted by information elsewhere. This information needs to be available in English, which is the language that almost all international students understand.

The topic of accommodation is particularly difficult since it is very diverse, with some students having accommodation arranged through the universities and others finding housing on the private market. We know from previous research that international students in Europe have many problems with finding accommodation, including lack of information, language barriers and fraud⁵. In a recent survey from the industry itself, executed by the Class of 2020, it was reported that the accommodation providers have responded to the emerging needs of students in various ways; 40.5% allowed students who returned home to cancel their contracts,

5 Alfranseder et. al. (2017)

some provided discounts on rent (16.7%) and others provided a rent free period (23.8%)⁶. Despite the complexity, it is important that students are correctly informed about their accommodation options. Even when students have arranged accommodation on the private market, the host universities need to inform the students about their rights, including options on what to do when their mobilities are interrupted.

Recommendation 1:

Ensure reliable and specific information that targets international student populations, in English or a language accessible to the international student population.

Recommendation 2:

Ensure that the student support available for domestic students (psychological support, logistical support, medical support, etc.) is also available for international students.

Recommendation 3:

Ensure that specific information about accommodation is available, including about students' rights when a mobility period is interrupted.

Financial impact

Most of the students who knew about the outcome for their Erasmus+ mobility grant were able to keep their grants: either fully, partially or receive additional real costs reimbursed. However, this must be the case for all international students, including the large majority of the students who answered that the situation was currently unclear. Since the survey was launched, the European Commission has communicated that it is “providing maximum flexibility to adapt their activities to the current situation, within the limits of the legal framework applicable⁷.”

Recommendation 4:

All Erasmus students should receive adequate funding to cover the costs they have incurred.

Online courses

It is clear that many physical classes all over Europe - certainly not only for international students - have been replaced by online classes. While this is an acceptable solution to an unprecedented problem, we should keep in mind that

6 Class of 2020.

7 European Commission (2020)

online classes are not a proper substitute for a physical mobility experience. Several problems were reported with the technical implementation of online courses, and while these can probably be worked around somehow, the real “Erasmus experience” is unlikely to be the same.

Recommendation 5:

Ensure equal access to online learning tools for students, be mindful of the diversity in student populations.

Recommendation 6:

Implement actions in learning activities or elsewhere that encourage interaction among students.

Recovery Strategy and Follow-up research

This research report was written in the midst of the crisis, when many things were uncertain and when new regulations from various governments came continuously at a high frequency across Europe. Once things have returned to normal - and at the time of writing we do not know when that may be - there needs to be an impact assessment looking at the final outcome of the crisis and the long-term consequences of the crisis on student mobility in the future. This needs to include, among other things, the final number of how many individual mobilities were cancelled, the financial impact on the students and the impact of moving studies online. In order to do so in a structured way, ESN suggests that supporting structures with targeted Erasmus+ project funding calls are put in place by the European Commission and Erasmus+ National Agencies.

Recommendation 7:

Supporting structures should be put in place in order to allow for impact assessment and to support the recovery of international student mobility.

Diversity and Inclusion

“Women, children, people with disabilities, the marginalized and the displaced, all pay the highest price in conflicts and are also most at risk of suffering devastating losses from COVID-19,” said United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres⁸. Crises tend to hit those who already face difficulties, such as students from disadvantaged backgrounds, harder than those who do not. According to the European Joint Research Centre, students from a lower socio-economic

8 United Nations, (2020)

background face a “double penalty”: they are, first, less likely to attend a university with a culture of mobility and, second, given their socio-economic background, they have a lower likelihood of participating in mobility schemes. Furthermore they indicate that mobility rates are lower with “pioneer students” whose parents did not attend higher education⁹.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, many students decided to leave their Erasmus destinations from one day to the other, incurring high costs in terms of transportation and other related aspects. The survey finds that these barriers have also been experienced with regards to emergency measures around the COVID-19 outbreak, those who could not afford such high costs had no such options. In the same sense, Erasmus students with disabilities or with health problems may be in particular danger in situations like this one.

These need to receive targeted support and information from both sending and receiving institutions. In order to serve all groups in societies, it is important that Equity, Inclusion and Diversity is addressed in emergency responses, and Emergency response plans, offering tailored and specific guidance and support where needed.

It is important that during the recovery process after the COVID-19 crisis, these population groups receive additional attention in order to ensure that the mobility opportunities for less advantaged students will not decrease over time. The Erasmus Student Network is currently coordinating the Social Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility project (siem-project.eu) that will tackle this topic at large.

Recommendation 8:

Ensure each measure taken by the institution is looked at through the lens of equity and diversity, to ensure solutions for students from less advantaged backgrounds in the emergency response offered.

Recommendation 9:

Ensure equity, diversity and inclusion actions are included in the recovery plans drafted by the institutions to address the needs of disadvantaged students in the recovery process.

⁹ Schnepf et.al., (2018)

Unity in Diversity

Overall the research shows that International students do not always feel that they have much access to information and support, since much of the information is available only in the local language. This, together with the inconsistent information and the diversity of measures implemented by European countries nationally across the board, contributes feelings of confusion and isolation. 3.9% of EU citizens reside in a different European member state. Each year 330.000 students take part in an Erasmus student mobility and 17.1 million people resided in an EU country other than that of their citizenship in 2018. It is important that national authorities and universities are aware of these minorities in society and take them into account when providing information. It is important that authorities clarify if exchange students are considered permanent residents and work together across borders to offer solutions for students to return home or stay in their host country in safety. Furthermore it is sad to see that students experience racism and discrimination throughout their experience. ESN believes in University in Diversity, in the fact that intercultural dialogue enriches society. Only by collaborating across Europe will be we able to find solutions for the current crisis and the financial crisis to follow.

Recommendation 10:

Transnational and cross-sectoral collaboration between universities, national authorities and student and youth organisations should be stimulated to overcome the impacts of the crisis.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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ANNEX: COUNTRIES

EU countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

Erasmus+ Programme Countries: all the EU countries mentioned above plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey and the UK.

ESN countries: ESN Albania, ESN Austria, ESN Azerbaijan, ESN Bosnia & Herzegovina, ESN Belarus, ESN Belgium, ESN Bulgaria, ESN Croatia, ESN Czech Republic, ESN Cyprus, ESN Denmark, ESN Estonia, ESN Finland, ESN France, ESN Georgia, ESN Germany, ESN Greece, ESN Hungary, ESN Iceland, ESN Ireland, ESN Italy, ESN Liechtenstein, ESN Lithuania, ESN Luxembourg, ESN Latvia, ESN Malta, ESN Moldova, ESN Netherlands, ESN Norway, ESN Poland, ESN Portugal, ESN Romania, ESN Russia, ESN Serbia, ESN Slovakia, ESN Slovenia, ESN Spain, ESN Sweden, ESN Switzerland, ESN Turkey, ESN Ukraine and ESN United Kingdom.