Compass

Study Report

Expectations and needs of students preparing their mobility process

Author: Suzanne Lesk

December 2021

Table of contents

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Definition of research goals

The purpose of this study is to gain further insights into the orientation and planning phase of the international mobility choices of students. The aim of the underlying Erasmus+ project Compass is to offer high quality and inclusive support and information for outgoing students, everywhere in Europe. In order to facilitate the decision process of future international students about a mobility abroad and to help them find the right place to study as well as to support the preparation phase for their mobility, the Compass Project will develop an online platform that offers easy access to quality information on mobility options and that induces strong collaboration between (ingoing and outgoing, local and international) students, associations and higher education institutions.

Our aim is that the future Compass Project online platform should meet the expectations and needs of students preparing for mobility. As a consequence, the main objective of this study is to identify every factor influencing students' decision making when preparing for mobility. In addition, every information source and channel that is used will be collected, as well as motivations and decision criteria. Moreover, we strive for compiling those aspects and factors that are currently still lacking to complete and facilitate the students' decision processes. This research will also question the peers' role and the importance of peer support in the decision making, as well as the role of the sending and receiving structures. It further aims at determining whether students have rational expectations, based on academic and practical criteria, or more "fanciful" or maybe unrealistic expectations based on social, cultural and subjective personal criteria. As an outcome, this study will provide a conceptual framework and recommendations for the future Compass Project platform (quality requirements, best practices, …) in order to design a well-tailored platform that can impact international mobility greatly and improve access to information.

1.2. Methodology

This study, which includes both a qualitative and quantitative study, examines all the factors that can influence students' decision making in preparing their mobility path, the sources and resources they use, both formal and informal, and what is still needed to complete and facilitate this moment of reflection and research (information, support, etc.). With this research, we would like to better understand, at each step, how students decide or decided to prepare, then how they experienced the mobility or on the contrary gave up the mobility . Our targeted publics therefore are the four following:

1. Local students preparing for international mobility: what will help them to decide, or on the contrary what will hold them back, what are they still lacking.

2. International students on mobility: how they decided, what helped them in their decision making, what they lacked, what criteria they took into consideration.

3. Local students back from international mobility: similar questions to the previous categories but with more hindsight.

4. Students having given up a mobility : what were the reasons for their abandonment (e.g. lack of accompaniment, lack of comprehension of the mobility experience , lack of financial support, …).

The empirical study was carried out in different European countries.

As for the quantitative part, the first version of the questionnaire was developed by the research team at the University of Vienna. After having integrated the feedback of the project partners, the questionnaire was transferred into the online survey tool "SoSci Survey". The link of the online survey was sent out by the partner institutions of the project, located in France, Italy, Luxembourg, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Austria, both within their own institutions and to different institutions of their own (national) network. Data was gathered from the end of May 2021 to the end of July 2021. As the response rate was not high enough at the end of June, we decided to extend the survey period until the end of July.

The interviews for the qualitative part were conducted in France, Italy, the United Kingdom and Austria. That is to say, that data collection took place at two partner universities in the project (University of Hertfordshire and University of Vienna) and at two ESN partner organisations (France and Italy). Altogether, we planned 48-50 semi-structured, preferably face-to-face interviews with persons representing the four target groups. Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, some interviews were conducted online and we reduced the number of interviews, also because it was not possible to identify students having given up a mobility project. Finally, we conducted 34 interviews.

- ⊘ In Vienna: (all together: 9, students back from mobility: 3, on mobility: 3, in preparation: 3)
- ⊘ In Paris: (all together 6, students back from mobility: 3, on mobility: 1, in preparation: 2)
- ⊘ In Hertfordshire: (all together 8, students back from mobility: 5, on mobility: 1, in preparation: 2)
- ⊘ In Italy: (all together 11, students back from mobility: 4, on mobility: 2, in preparation: 3, having given up: 2)

At the University of Vienna, the interview guidelines with open questions were elaborated and after shared with the project partners. After this feedback process, the guidelines were adapted and finally used by the four above-mentioned partner organisations to perform the interviews. There are four similar versions of the guidelines: questions for the different target groups were adapted according to the temporal perspective on the mobility , and in the case of the fourth category (students having given up a mobility), we included a section on reasons for abandonment. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in each country.

We asked questions concerning the following topics:

- ⊘ Planning process (length, challenges)
- ⊘ Motivations to go abroad (reasons, benefits, challenges)
- ⊘ General information (application process, information channels)
- ⊘ Selection of country (criteria)
- ⊘ Culture and language (proficiency, improved skills, decision criteria)
- ⊘ Selection of institution (criteria)
- ⊘ Improvements (support, information)
- ⊘ Future online platform (features, preferences)

From June to the end of October 2021, the interviews were conducted. Transcripts from partners were delivered from July until November 2021. To analyse the transcripts, we conducted a qualitative content analysis. Categories were built deductively prior to analysing the data and they are based on the main topics from the interview guideline. Categories were applied to the transcripts with the help of the computer-based programme Maxqda.

2. EMPIRICAL STUDY

2.1. Quantitative study

In total, we had 1.238 respondents, so we reached our planned goal of 1.000 answered questionnaires. In terms of gender, we obtained 62 % female (1) responses and 36 % male (2). The remaining percent (3+4) were persons of the category "other" or persons who preferred not to unveil their gender.

**2%**
Other

36%
Male

62%
Female
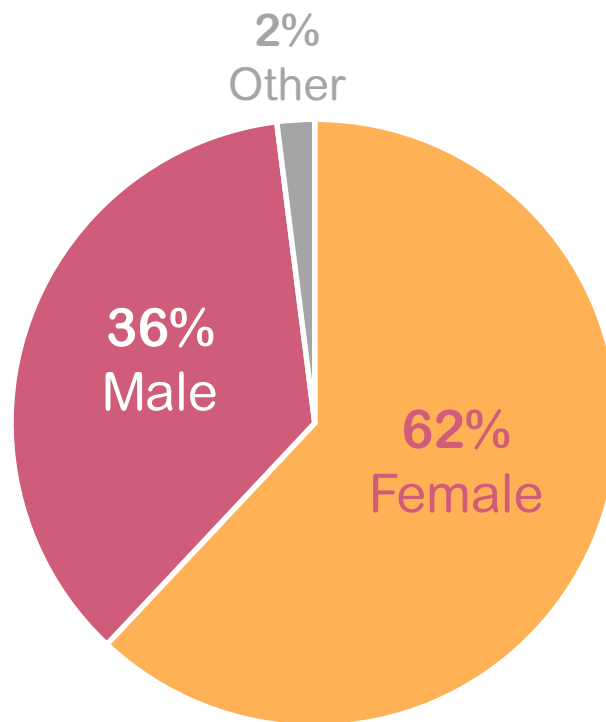
Gender

Our largest age group was between 20 to 24 years (966 respondents), followed by students aged between 25 and 29 years (161 respondents), we also identified 67 students between 15 and 19 years old. All the other categories were minor.

2%
30-34

1%
35-59

6%
15-19

**13%**
25-29

78%
20-24
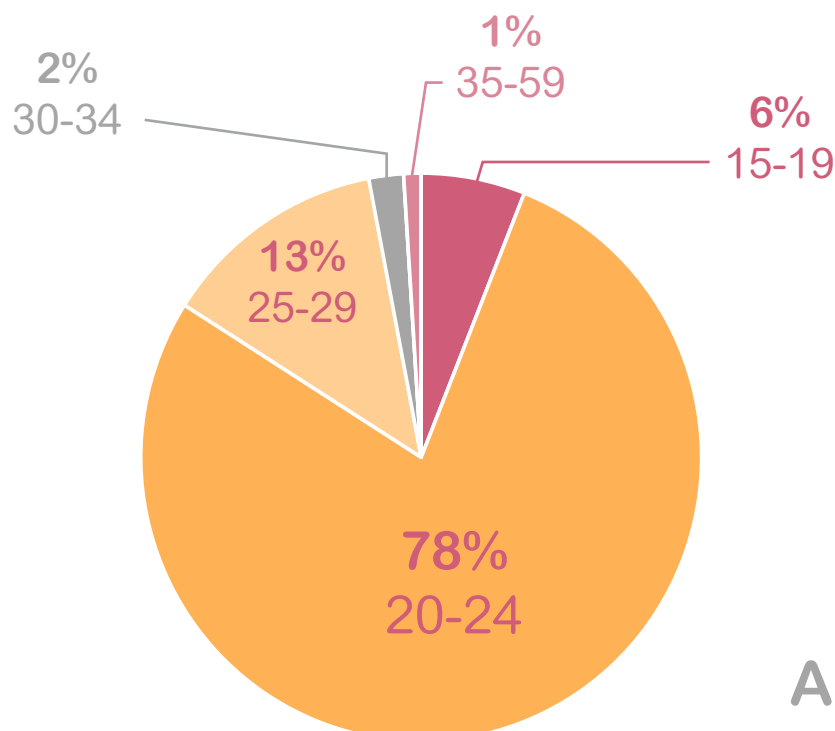
Age

Unfortunately, our 4 student categories were not equally divided. 61 % of our respondents were students preparing for mobility , 12 % were students on mobility, 24 % were students back from mobility and only 3 % were students who gave up a mobility project.

Student category

- 3%
- 24%
- 12%
- 61%
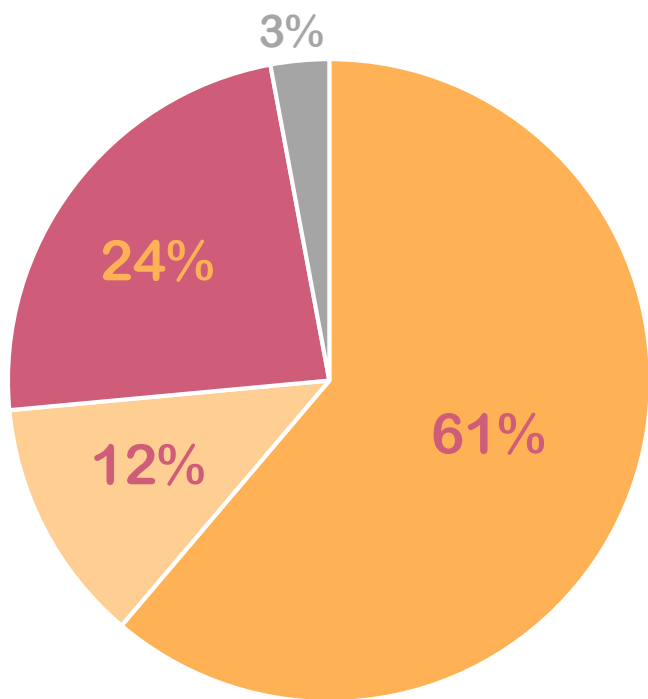
- A student preparing to go on an international mobility
- A student currently on mobility
- A student back from their international mobility
- A student having given up their mobility project

As for the study degree programme, one-half of our respondents approximately were pursuing bachelors studies, 41 % masters studies, 3 % doctoral studies or PhD and 4 % other courses of studies.

Study degree programme

- 3%
- 3%
- 41%
- 53%
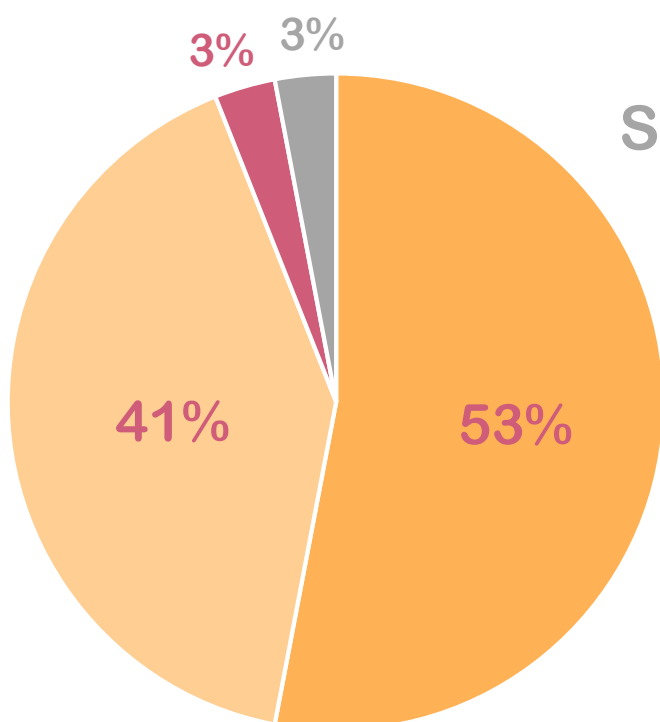
- Bachelor studies
- Master studies
- Doctoral studies / Ph.D.
- Other
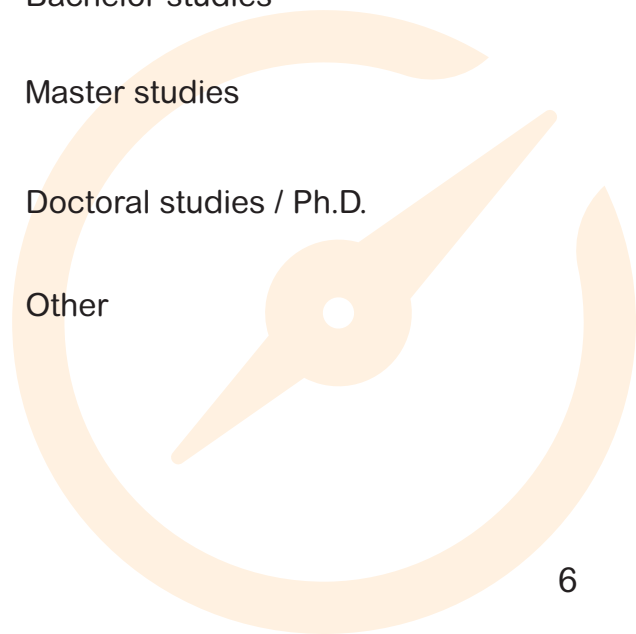
2.1.1 Local students preparing a mobility

2.1.1.1 Characteristics

The large majority of students preparing a mobility (73 %) planned to go abroad in autumn/ winter term 2021/22, 21 % wanted to study abroad in spring/summer term 2022.

2.1.1.2 Planning Process

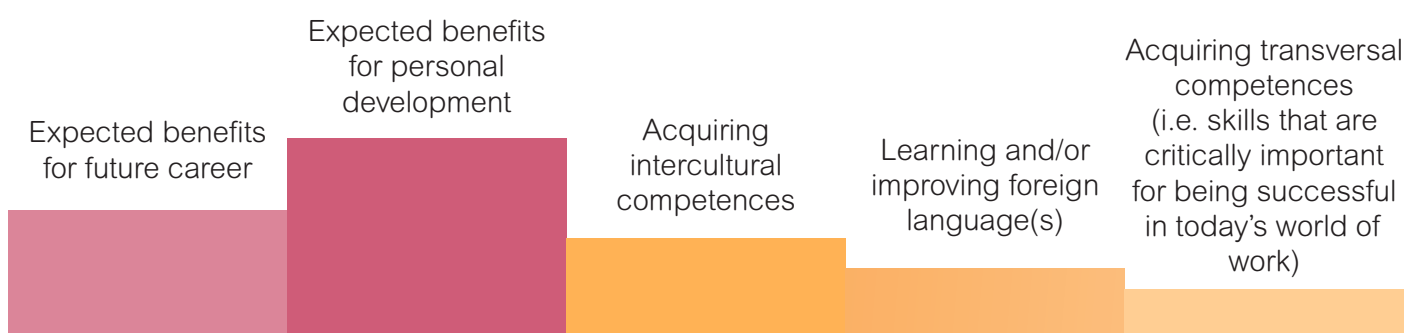They planned to go abroad either for one semester (65 %) or for 2 semesters (27 %). Almost all (98 %) had already chosen the country of destination and the host institution. Destinations were mostly located in Europe (e.g. France, Italy, Portugal, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom, Ireland, Malta; Estonia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Austria, Slovenia, Greece, Turkey, Russian Federation). Outside Europe, the following destinations were mentioned: Brazil, Chile, Australia, Israel, USA, Canada, South Korea, Japan, and China.

2.1.1.3 Motivation to go abroad

As for the motivational factors to go abroad, the personal influencing factors ("Expected benefits for personal development", "Expected benefits for future career") were prevailing. These were followed by some cultural and linguistic influencing factors ("Acquiring intercultural competencies", "Learning and/or improving foreign language(s)"). Academic and financial reasons were also important as well (see ranking 6-9).

Motivational factors

Expected benefits for future career

Expected benefits for personal development

Acquiring intercultural competences

Learning and/or improving foreign language(s)

Acquiring transversal competences (i.e. skills that are critically important for being successful in today's world of work)

- o Expected benefits for study progress
- o Expected benefits for study-related specialised knowledge
- o Obtained scholarship
- o Financial support from parents
- o Dreaming of aimed country
- o Peers studying abroad
- o Valuing the reputation of aimed country
- o Family or relatives having experienced an international mobility

- o Other social links abroad (i.e. pen-friends, online community…)
- o Obligation in curriculum
- o Family or relatives abroad
- o Other social factors
- o Other personal factors
- o Other economic factors
- o Other academic factors
- o Other cultural factors
- o Other influencing factors

Steps that a local student must go through

Getting information about
mobility programmes

Getting information about
application procedure

Filling the application
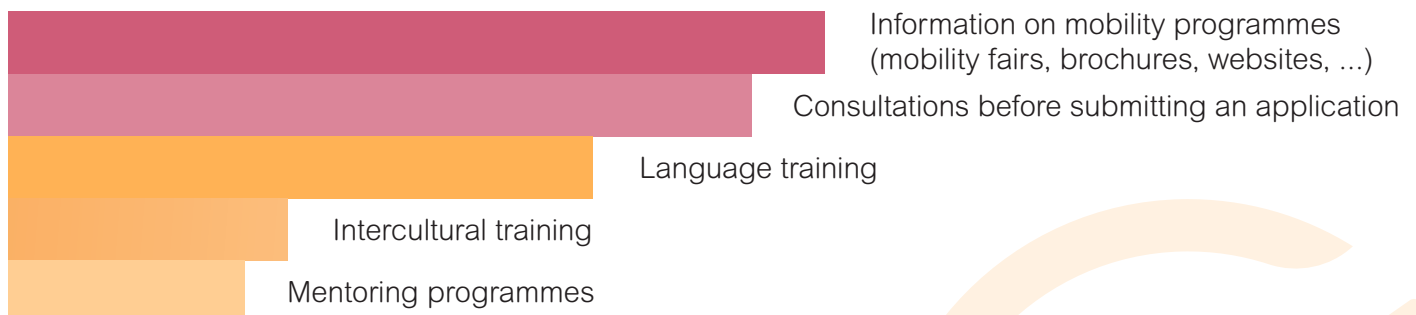files/Gathering all of the
required documents

- o Getting information about available financial support
- o Organising the travel
- o Being successful in a formal selection procedure

- o Administrative procedures: visa, health insurance etc.
- o Getting to know testimonies from students with a mobility experience
- o Passing an Intercultural training

Not every sending institution provides the same support: Language and intercultural training, as well as mentoring programmes are not offered everywhere.

Support available for students applying to go on mobility

Information on mobility programmes (mobility fairs, brochures, websites, ...)

Consultations before submitting an application

Language training

Intercultural training

Mentoring programmes

In addition to the steps listed above, respondents mentioned some other measures that have to be successfully fulfilled in order to go abroad, e.g. one-to-one meetings with the mobility team, briefings, language course or OLS (Online Linguistic Support), looking for accommodation abroad, preparation of OLA, participation in language courses beforehand, filling the application for national funding (based on the economic status of family) or meetings for parents with a psychologist and other parents.

The vast majority of institutions (5 out of 6) require an online application today. This tendency was pushed by the Covid 19 pandemic. More than 98 % of the students said that their information collecting were changed by the pandemic (more online formats, health issues, complex online search for information):

- ⌀ "Because of the COVID 19 pandemic, we used several information resources from online websites or relatives. Moreover, every required document must be submitted in a virtual way."
- ⌀ "We didn't have the possibility to talk to someone in person about the mobility programme."
- ⌀ "I could not speak with the responsible, interactions were just via email."
- ⌀ "Some countries have strong Covid measures, so I had to research on the format of the classes. In my case, they will be online and on-site."
- ⌀ "I need to get the vaccine and fill out many health insurance documents."
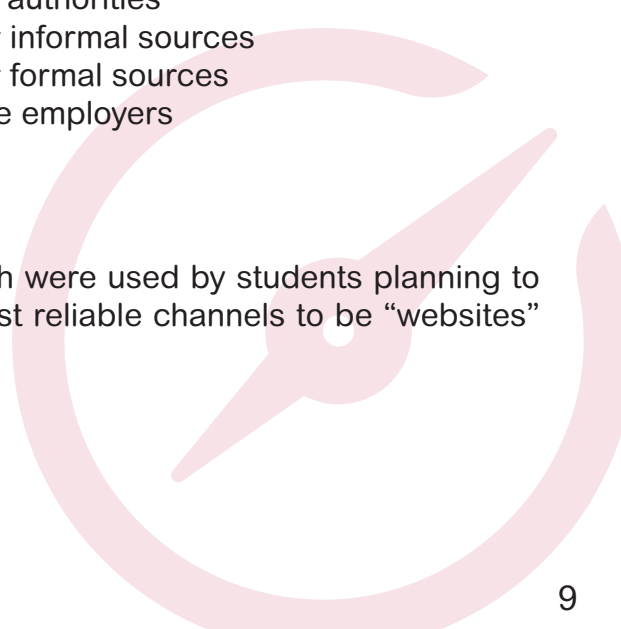
2.1.1.5 Sources and channels of information

The graph below shows the sources of information which were used by students planning to go on mobility. They considered as most useful and most reliable sources "the students having returned from mobility", "the students on mobility" and "the international office or study abroad office".

Information sources

Friends — International office or study abroad office — Students having returned from a mobility — Fellow students — Students on mobility
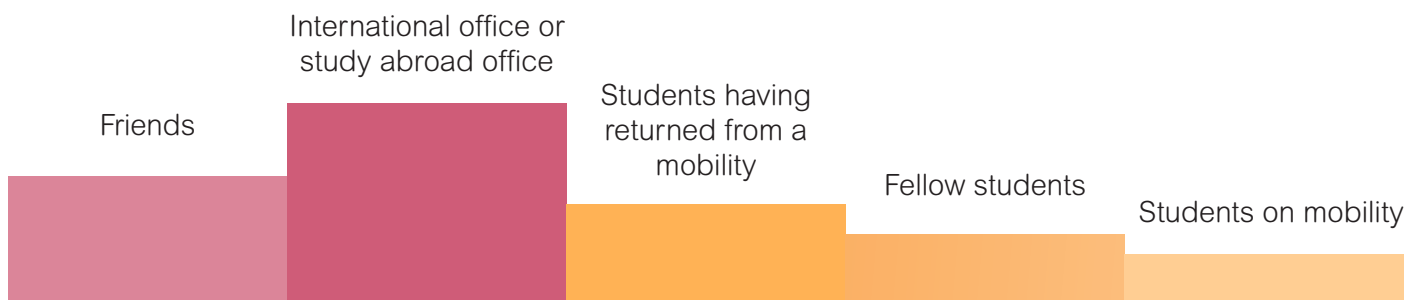
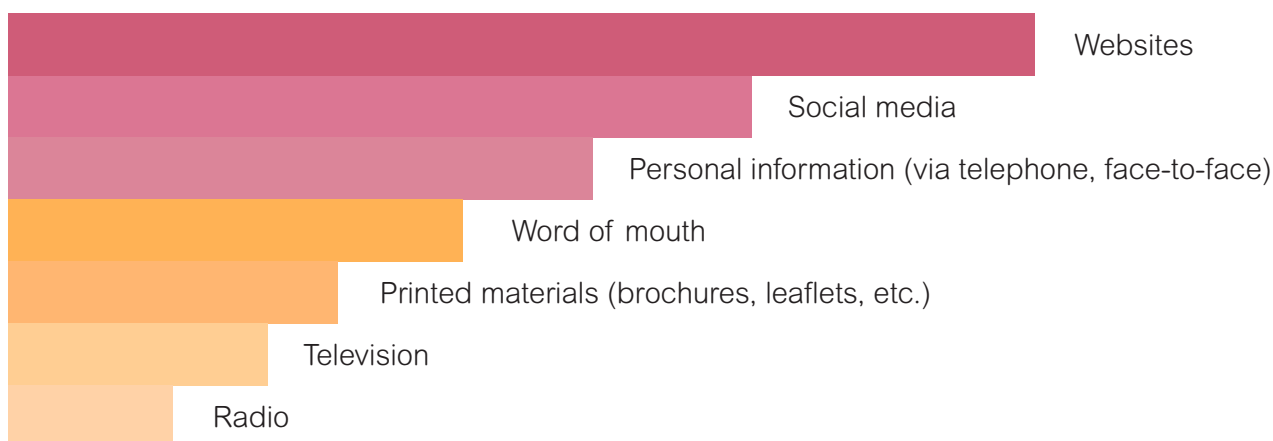- ○ Family
- ○ Student organisations
- ○ International student fairs
- ○ Foreign authorities

- ○ Local authorities
- ○ Other informal sources
- ○ Other formal sources
- ○ Future employers

The graph below shows the channels of information which were used by students planning to go on mobility. They considered the most useful and most reliable channels to be "websites" and "personal information".

Support available for students applying to go on mobility

Websites

Social media

Personal information (via telephone, face-to-face)

Word of mouth

Printed materials (brochures, leaflets, etc.)

Television

Radio

2.1.1.6 Selection criteria referring to the country of destination

The three most important selection criteria concerning the host country according to the respondents were the possibility and motivation to develop linguistic and cultural competences and the assumption that the country of destination would be an exciting place to live. Of especially minor importance are geographic proximity, historical and economic links or linguistic relatedness between home and host country.

Importance of selection criteria (host country)

Most important

I consider the country of destination as an exciting place to live.

I value the opportunity to develop my skills in the language of the host country.

I want to develop my cultural competencies (related to the host country).

Less important

My home country and my host country are sharing the same language/are linguistically related.

There are historical and/or economic links between the host country and my home country.
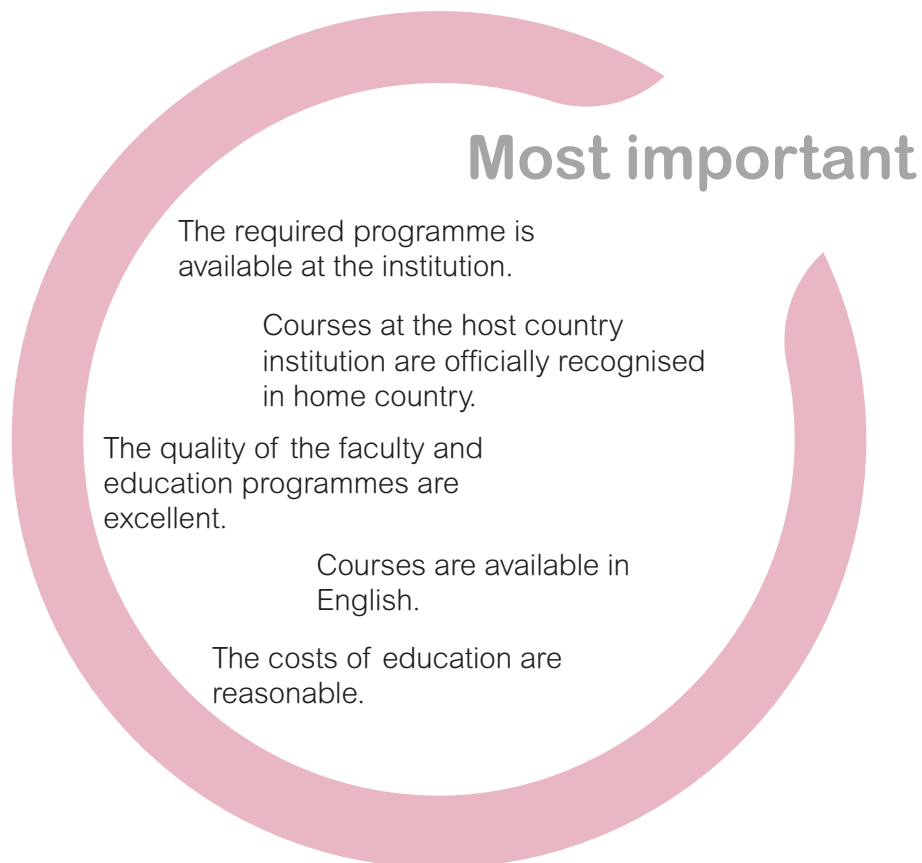
I like the geographic proximity of the host country in relation to my home country.

- o I personally already have some knowledge of the host country.
- o I appreciate the (comfortable) climate of the host country.
- o The costs of living in the host country are reasonable.
- o I value the political and social security in the host country.
- o I think that there is a low discrimination rate in the host country.
- o I think that there is a low crime rate in the host country.
- o I appreciate the study climate in the host country.
- o I especially appreciate the availability of (science) programmes in the host country.
- o There are already well-established exchange programmes between my home and the host country.

2.1.1.7 Selection criteria referring to host university

As for the selection criteria relating to the host university, we found out that all items below were considered as being rather important than being unimportant (all being less than 3 on average). However, formal issues (availability of study programme and recognition) were most important, as well as the quality of the faculty and education programmes. By contrast, the impression from campus visits, the type of institution or marketing efforts by the institution seemed to be less important to students.

Importance of selection criteria (host institution)

Most important

The required programme is available at the institution.

Courses at the host country institution are officially recognised in home country.

The quality of the faculty and education programmes are excellent.

Courses are available in English.

The costs of education are reasonable.

- The academic reputation and/or prestige of the institution is outstanding.
- The expertise of the teaching staff is great.
- Teachers have good practical knowledge or links to the industry.
- The institution offers specialised courses relevant to professions and/or employers.
- Course design and teaching methods are up to date.
- The use of information technology and online learning is standard.
- I am pleased with the class sizes and the learning environment of the host country institution.
- The profile of students at the host country institution is interesting.
- Graduation success is very likely.
- There are well established joint education programmes between my home country institution and my host country institution.
- Scholarships are available.
- The host institution offers financial assistance.
- I consider the type of institution (public/private) in my decision process.
- The marketing and communication efforts by the institution are professional and impressive.
- There are attractive extracurricular activities in the institution.
- I value the location of the institution.
- I have a good impression from campus visits.
- There are good infrastructural facilities at the institution (including public transport).
- I rely on my friends'/relatives'/teachers' recommendations

2.1.1.8 The role of culture and language

Learning the local language and immersing themselves into the local culture is still an important source of motivation and a key motive for a large proportion of students going abroad. Still, there is another large student community which prefers courses in English (that could be in some cases the local language but not always) and who intends to stay within the international community.

Statements on culture and language

Strongly agree | **Strongly disagree**

I want to learn the local language.

I value the opportunity to develop my English skills in the host country.

I prefer to choose a programme in English.

I prefer a host country which is culturally distant (very different from my home country's culture).

I prefer a host country which is culturally close to my home country's culture.

I would like to meet mainly local students.

I intend to stay within the international students' community.

I am very interested in the local culture.

2.1.1.9 Impact of Covid 19

60 % of the respondents told us that the Covid 19 pandemic had not influenced their planning, however, 40 % felt it had influenced. Those feeling influenced mentioned, for example, that their stay abroad was postponed or even cancelled. The pandemic also impacted the selection of the host country ("I decided to leave as far as possible, hoping for a better situation.", "I have chosen a closer destination and one belonging to the EU."). Many were confronted with uncertainties concerning travelling, country-specific regulations concerning the pandemic, greater difficulties to find an accommodation, less support from host universities and more preparation being needed. Some students wanted to wait for being vaccinated, others were afraid of travelling abroad because of the pandemic. As a result, it also favoured last-minute decisions whether to go or not to go.

Improvements suggested in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic:

- Ⓒ Information on what covid plans and contingencies are, as the mobility just being cancelled is not acceptable
- Ⓒ Continuous planning during the pandemic
- Ⓒ Information on teaching methods

The graph below shows that on average students during the pandemic would have needed more support from the host and home universities (see also Chapter 3.1.1.10 below).

Statements on culture and language

Strongly agree   **Strongly disagree**

I want to learn the local language.

I value the opportunity to develop my English skills in the host country.

I prefer to choose a programme in English.

I prefer a host country which is culturally distant (very different from my home country's culture).

I prefer a host country which is culturally close to my home country's culture.

I would like to meet mainly local students.

I intend to stay within the international students' community.

I am very interested in the local culture.

2.1.1.10 Suggested improvements

Not all students preparing their mobility were still lacking information in their orientation and decision process. Those who complained about lacking information mentioned mainly the following realms:

- General information on mobilities, documentation, application process for not regular studies
- Comprehensive checklist on what is actually needed to get done (country-specific, e.g. for the U.S.)
- Information on Erasmus grants, economic assistance, financial support, scholarships
- Information on accommodation (availability of cheap housing, availability of dormitory)
- Information concerning the learning agreement (selection of courses, classes, exams, modules available)
- Information from home university (nomination process, confirmation of mobility)
- Information from host university (incomplete website e.g. lack of information on subjects taught)
- Information on scheduling (start and end dates of mobility, beginning of classes, date and period of incoming international student week)
- Information on travelling (departure date, travel arrangements, transport options inside the country)
- Information on useful extracurricular activities
- Information on everyday-university life in the destination country, host city life
- Information on visas (e.g. for students stemming from Russia or Belarus, for students from the United Kingdom entering the EU or for students going to the United States), visa decision
- Information on requirements due to the Covid 19 pandemic:
    - whether lectures will be online or in presence, software requirements
    - Covid 19 vaccination
    - host country policy concerning vaccinated people, on mandatory vaccination or not and possibility to enter in the country without quarantine
    - self-isolation costs
    - support from host country/host institution
    - health insurance during pandemic
    - information on travel bans
- Information on and access to stories from experienced persons, contacts with students, CV books of alumni, and industry links
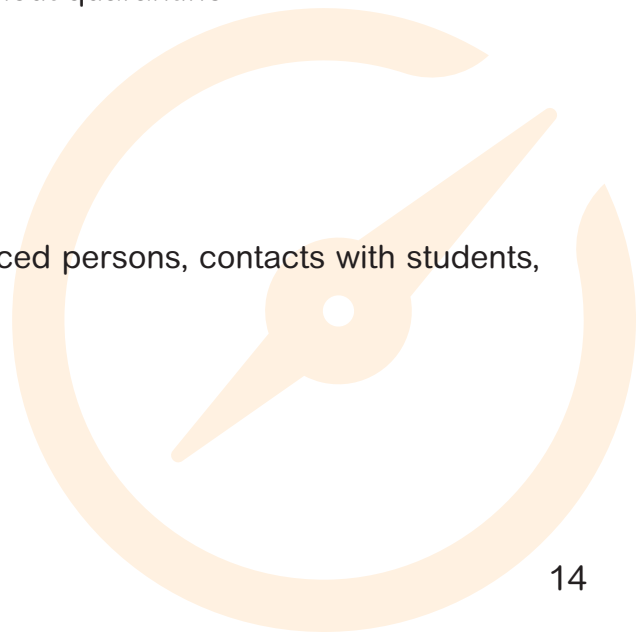
The lack of information is usually closely connected to the lack of support. Here, we collected the following aspects on still missing support:

- ⊘ Emotional support

- ⊘ Orientation (finding the right host institution)

- ⊘ Mobility office of my university ("Someone from my university to guide me", "I feel like I am walking blindfolded", "More information about how the semester will be organised", "Currently I have received no informational support from my home university about my mobility")

- ⊘ Confirmation of mobility from home institution and Erasmus programme

- ⊘ Mobility office of the host institution ("not helpful or prompt", "insufficient help from local referent and lack of answers", "I can barely contact them", "The hosting university has not yet confirmed the calendar of the courses and the admission to the students dormitory")

- ⊘ Financial Support ("I still don't know if I will be awarded a scholarship", "I am looking for scholarship for booking a room to stay")

- ⊘ Support with flights and travel because of Covid 19, travel stability

- ⊘ Advice about travelling with valuable equipment/lots of luggage

- ⊘ Support with visa procedure

- ⊘ Support with finding the right accommodation

- ⊘ Support with finding language courses

- ⊘ Support from experienced peers ("A student from the host institution who leads me through the courses and shows me the different places and functions of the host institution", "Getting to know people from the host institution", "Students that have been there")

- ⊘ Finding the group or place where I can chat with my future university mates

- ⊘ Support on courses ("How lecture works", "Knowledge on how foreign exams link to my university exams", "Information about courses' availability have been sometimes erratic")

- ⊘ Special learning skills support
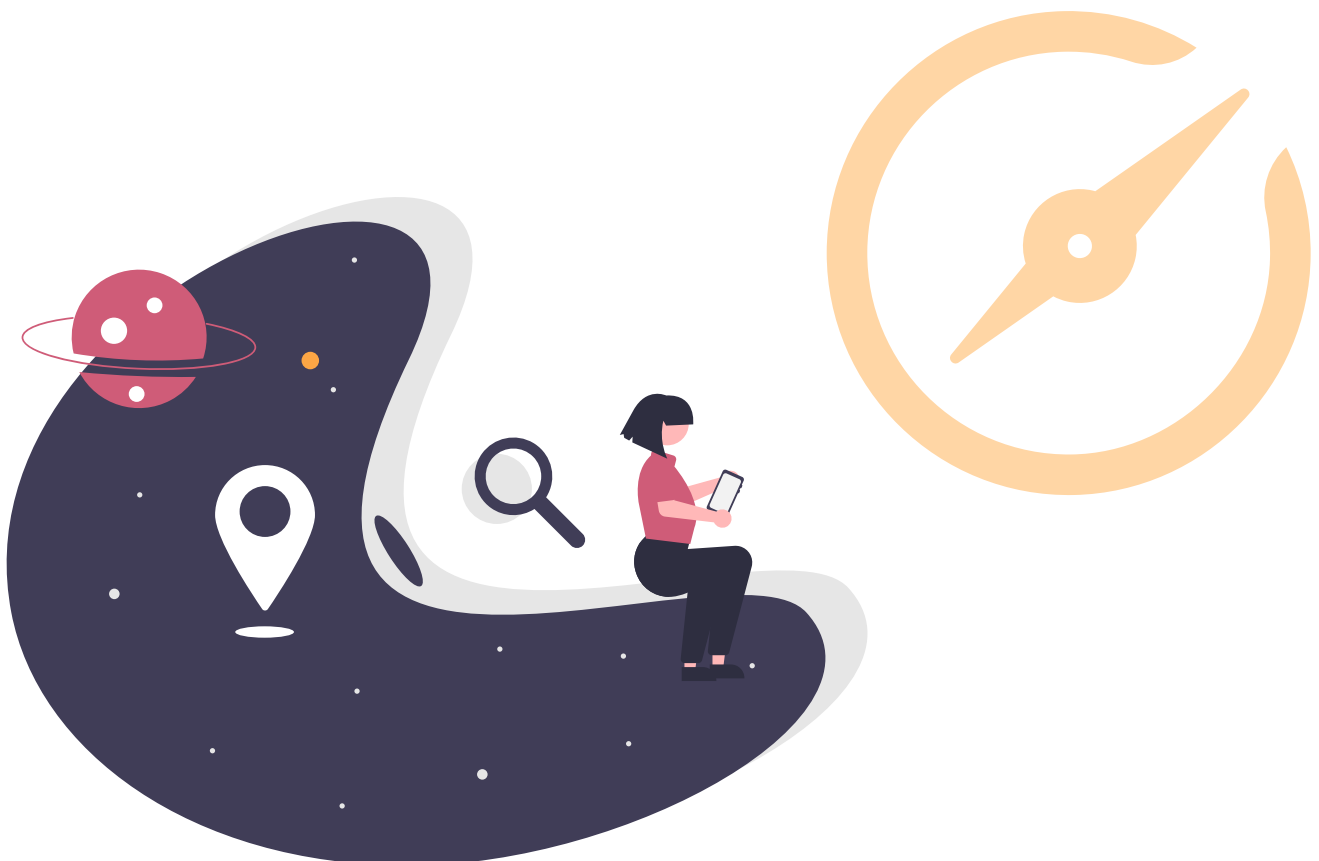
Higher education institutions and other stakeholders could support the students' decision process better by providing the following items:

- Information events where relevant information about application process is given and questions can be asked, webinars

- Centralised application process in a platform from Erasmus ("The fact that every pair of institutions organise their process differently makes it harder to find clear information of all the steps needed."), facilitating research process on universities' websites

- More detailed and earlier information about the whole process ("Not letting the mobility students do all the work, especially if they are going for the first time."), detailed guides/ checklists, and web links and contacts

- "Adding monthly deadlines in which the host and home institution exchange (publicly to the exchange students) the information processed and the status of the bureaucratic processes"

- Reduction of bureaucracy, support during the compilation process of the exchange paperwork (tutoring)

- Enhanced promotion of mobility programs

- Recommendations about grants for financial support and increased availability of scholarships, help with financial agreement

- Recommendations about accommodation/dormitory options that are preferably for students

- Reducing response times significantly on emails/phone calls

- Offering a wider range of host universities from less popular/well known countries

- Creation of an easier method of research and creation of new connections between universities, selection of partner universities linked to similarities in study programme

- Information on teaching and courses (methods, courses, subjects) and detailed publications of available courses on host universities' websites (: "By telling me the courses that I can attend in a specific host institution (because of their similarities with my home institution courses)", help with learning agreement

- Facilitating recognition of courses/exams done abroad

- Evaluation of students' needs

- Information on language development opportunities prior to the study abroad

- Recommendations on what to consider when booking travel

- Providing contact to other people there ("By providing the contact details of the students' buddies abroad earlier")

- Links with students to help them organise the mobility better (Organisation of online meetings or groups for questions)

- Providing more information about other students' experiences in the previous years, reviews from returned students

- Follow students' path throughout the semester

- Faster approval of study plans, updating the guides for the forms that have to be filled online, be more flexibles about exams

The answers on the statements below show that especially institutional support can still be developed. Students feel on average rather informed and they are rather satisfied with the current possibilities to get informed about mobilities. However, the results could be surely improved by implementing some of the measures mentioned above.

Statements on decision process

Strongly agree   **Strongly disagree**

I feel well informed in this current phase of preparing my mobility.

It is easy to decide for me where to go to.

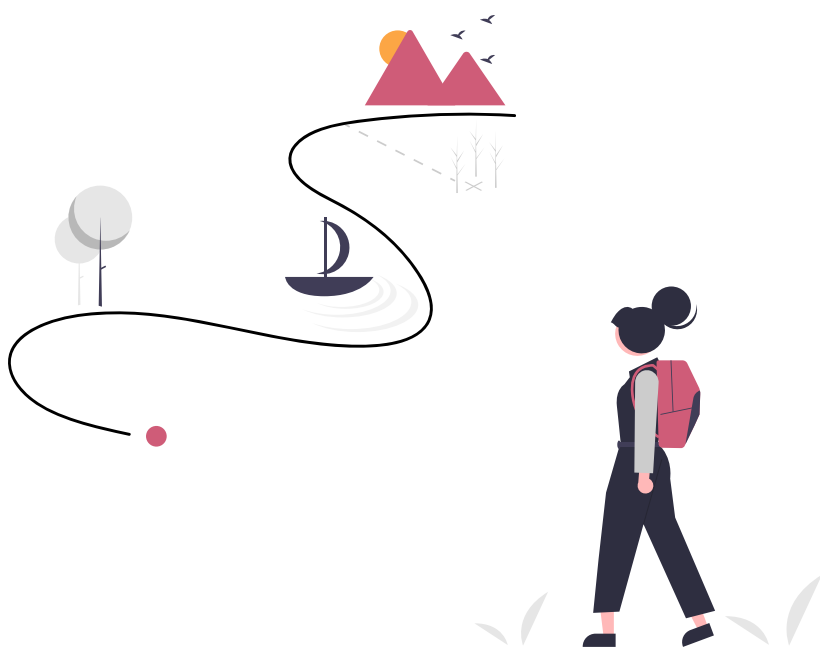I would like to have more support from peers.

I would like to have more institutional support.

I am still undecided because of economic restraints.

I am still undecided because of economic restraints.

2.1.2 International students on mobility

2.1.2.1 Characteristics

In total, we had 146 respondents in the category "international students in mobility". The large majority of students in mobility (53 %) were abroad in spring/summer term 2021, 30 % studied abroad in autumn/winter term 2020/2021 and spring/summer term 2021, 12 % in spring/summer term 2021 and autumn/winter term 2021/2022.
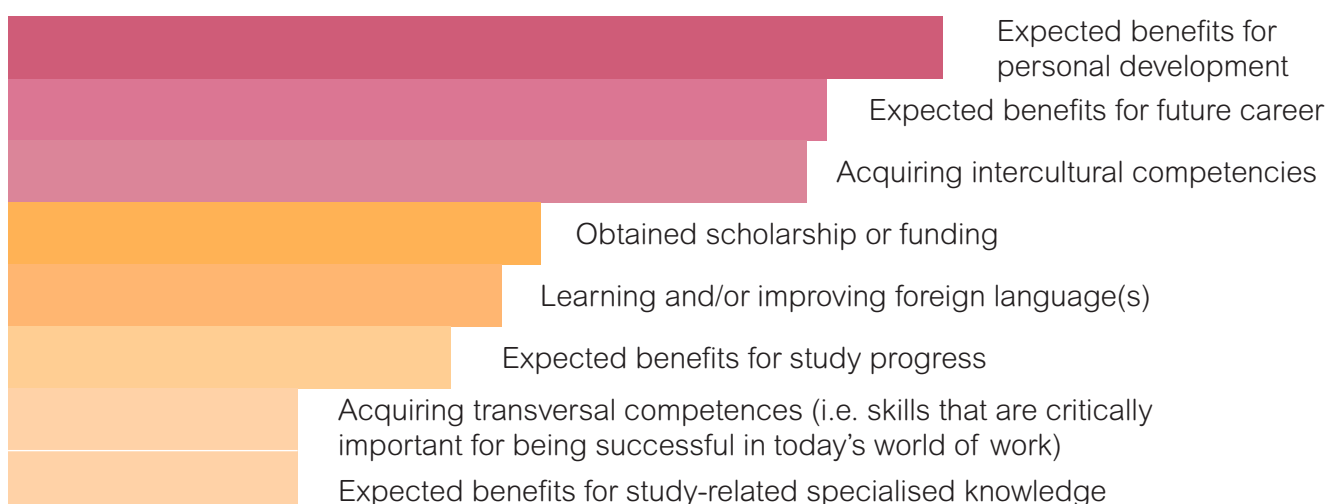
2.1.2.2 Planning Process

They went abroad for one semester (43 %), for 2 semesters (32 %), for 3 semesters (6 %) or for 4 semesters (10 %). Destinations were located in Europe (e.g. France, Italy, Portugal, Germany, Spain, Finland, Sweden, United Kingdom, Poland, Czech Republic, Austria, Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Albania, Moldova), in Asia (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia/Siberia, Lebanon, Iran, Malaysia, Singapore, China), in Africa (Libya, Tunisia), in America (USA, Colombia, Brazil, Chile, Venezuela) and in Oceania (French Polynesia).

2.1.2.3 Motivation to go abroad

As for the motivational factors to go abroad, the personal influencing factors ("Expected benefits for personal development", "Expected benefits for future career"), some cultural and linguistic influencing factors ("Acquiring intercultural competencies", "Learning and/or improving foreign language(s)", "Acquiring transversal competences"), as well as certain academic ("Expected benefits for study progress") and financial reasons are important. The order of motivational factors does not differ very much from the ranking of the first group of students ("students planning to go abroad"), actually it is nearly the same.

Motivational factors

Expected benefits for personal development

Expected benefits for future career

Acquiring intercultural competencies

Obtained scholarship or funding

Learning and/or improving foreign language(s)

Expected benefits for study progress

Acquiring transversal competences (i.e. skills that are critically important for being successful in today's world of work)

Expected benefits for study-related specialised knowledge

- Financial support from parents
- Peers studying abroad
- Dreaming of chosen country
- Valuing the reputation of chosen country
- Family or relatives having experienced an international mobility

- Other social links abroad (i.e. pen-friends, online community...)
- Obligation in curriculum
- Family or relatives abroad
- Other social, economic, personal, academic, cultural, influencing factors

2.1.2.4 Application process

In addition to the steps listed below, respondents mentioned that due to the Covid 19 pandemic, travel organisation was different. Concerning documentation, it was noted that one should "check very well all the documents necessary, even if not required at first in the application process".
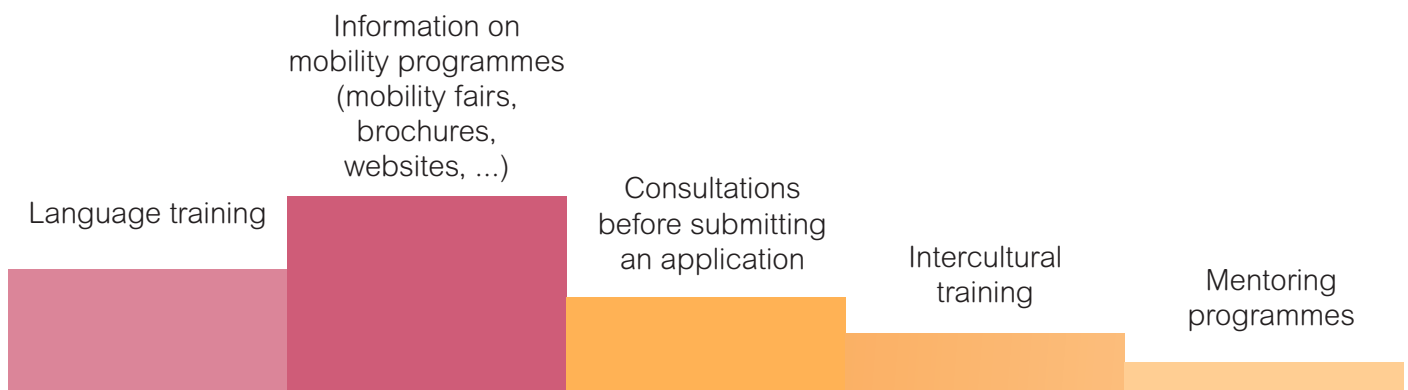
It is remarkable that, again, the ranking did not differ in any remarkable way compared to the first group of students. However, it strikes that both groups, basically, did not need to pass an intercultural training before their stay abroad.

Steps that a local student must go through

- ⊘ Getting information about mobility programmes
- ⊘ Getting information about application procedure
- ⊘ Filling the application files/Gathering all of the required documents
- ⊘ Getting information about available financial support
- ⊘ Administrative procedures: visa, health insurance etc.
- ⊘ Being successful in a formal selection procedure
- ⊘ Organising the travel
- ⊘ Getting to know testimonies from students with a mobility experience
- ⊘ Passing an intercultural training

According to the students on mobility, sending institutions do rarely provide intercultural training and mentoring programmes.

Support available for students applying to go on mobility

| Language training | Information on mobility programmes (mobility fairs, brochures, websites, ...) | Consultations before submitting an application | Intercultural training | Mentoring programmes |

81 % of the higher education institutions required an online application when the respondents did their planning.

2.1.2.5 Sources and channels of information

The graph below shows the sources of information which were used by students on mobility. They considered the students planning to go on mobility as the most useful and most reliable sources were "the students having returned from mobility", "the students on mobility" and "the international office or study abroad office".

Information sources
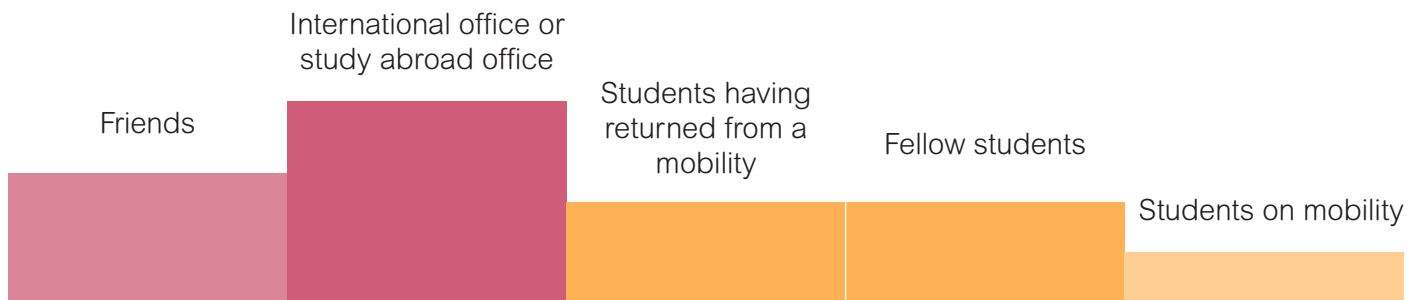
- International student fairs
- Foreign authorities
- Local authorities
- Family

- Student organisations
- Other formal sources
- Other informal sources
- Future employers

The graph below shows the channels of information that were used by students currently on mobility in their planning process. The ranking is identical to the habits of students planning to go on mobility. Like the first group, students on mobility are considered as most useful and as most reliable channels "websites" and "personal information". They believed that "television" and "radio" were the least useful or reliable (with values around 3 or more on a scale from 1 =most useful/reliable and 5 = not at all useful/reliable).

Information channels
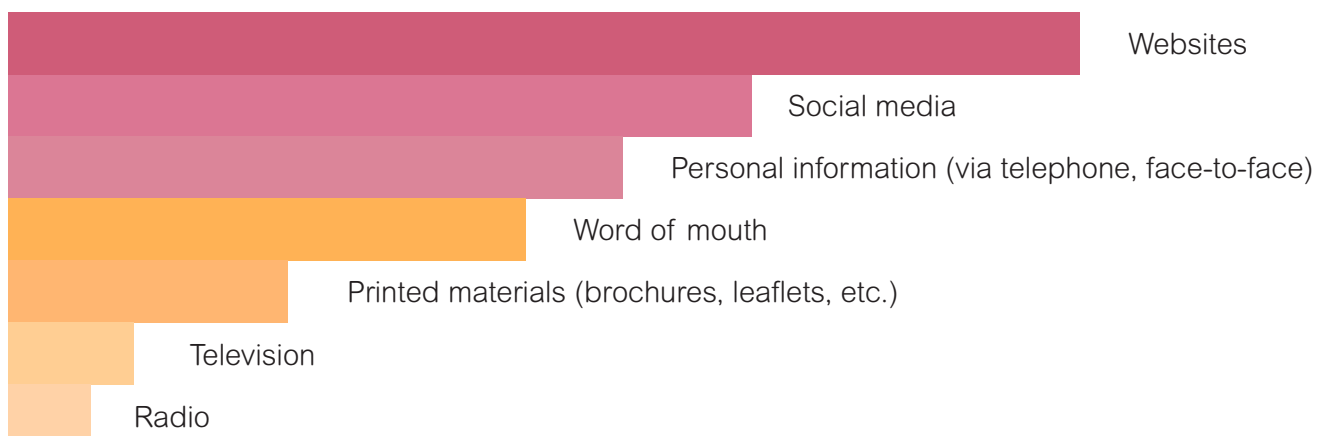
2.1.2.6 Selection criteria referring to the country of destination

The three most important selection criteria concerning the host country according to the respondents were the possibility and motivation to develop linguistic and cultural competences and the assumption that the country of destination would be an exciting place to live. Of especially minor importance were geographic proximity, historical and economic links or linguistic relatedness between home and host country. These results correspond to the results of the first group of students.

Importance of selection criteria (host country)

Most important

I consider the country of destination as an exciting place to live.

I value the opportunity to develop my skills in the language of the host country.

I want to develop my cultural competencies (related to the host country).

Less important

My home country and my host country are sharing the same language/are linguistically related.

There are historical and/or economic links between the host country and my home country.

I like the geographic proximity of the host country in relation to my home country.

- o I personally already have some knowledge of the host country.
- o I appreciate the (comfortable) climate of the host country.
- o The costs of living in the host country are reasonable.
- o I value the political and social security in the host country.
- o I think that there is a low discrimination rate in the host country.
- o I think that there is a low crime rate in the host country.
- o I appreciate the study climate in the host country.
- o I especially appreciate the availability of (science) programmes in the host country.
- o There are already well-established exchange programmes between my home and the host country.

2.1.2.7 Selection criteria referring to host university

As for the selection criteria relating to the host university, we found that almost all items below were considered as being rather important than being unimportant (being less than 3 on average). Formal issues (availability of study programme and recognition) were most important, as well as the location of the institution. Retrospectively, marketing efforts by the institution, financial assistance by the host university or recommendations from friends, relatives and teachers seemed to be less important to students currently on mobility.

Importance of selection criteria
(host institution)

Most important

The required programme is available at the institution.

Courses at the host country institution are officially recognised in the home country.

I value the location of the institution.

Less important

The marketing and communication efforts by the institution are professional and impressive.

The host institution offers financial assistance.

I relied on my friends'/relatives'/teachers' recommendations.

- The academic reputation and/or prestige of the institution is outstanding.
- The quality of the faculty and education programmes is excellent.
- The expertise of the teaching staff is great.
- Teachers have good practical knowledge or links to the industry.
- The institution offers specialised courses relevant to professions and/or employers.
- Course design and teaching methods are up to date.
- Courses are available in English.
- The use of information technology and online learning is standard.
- I was pleased with the class sizes and the learning environment of the host country institution.
- The profile of students at the host country institution is interesting.
- Graduation success is very likely.
- The costs of education are reasonable.
- There are well established joint education programmes between my home country institution and my host country institution.
- Scholarships are available.
- I consider the type of institution (public/private) in my decision process.
- There are attractive extracurricular activities in the institution.
- I had a good impression from campus visits.
- There are good infrastructural facilities at the institution (including public transport).

2.1.2.8 The role of culture and language

Learning the local language, immersing into the local culture and meeting locals are also big motives for students currently abroad. Still, there is another large student community which prefers courses in English (that could be in some cases the local language but not always).

Statements on culture and language

Strongly agree   **Strongly disagree**

I want to learn the local language.

I value the opportunity to develop my English skills in the host country.

I prefer to choose a programme in English.

I prefer a host country which is culturally distant (very different from my home country's culture).

I prefer a host country which is culturally close to my home country's culture.

I would like to meet mainly local students.

I intend to stay within the international students' community.

I am very interested in the local culture.

2.1.2.9 Impact of Covid 19

Around 50 % of the students said that their information collecting has not been changed by the pandemic. But, the other half reported on the following issues concerning their modified information collecting:

- ⊘ "Main focus on Covid situation, less focus on other fears like finding a room, making friends etc."
- ⊘ "In terms of which countries would be reasonably saved to travel to or to be considered as a destination in general."
- ⊘ "It was all online, so no possibility to meet and talk with people directly."
- ⊘ "Not clear, some information was contradicting. Everything changed fast."
- ⊘ "I was obliged to inform myself about risk status of my country, covid tests, insurance and rules of quarantine in the host country."
- ⊘ "In necessitated the gathering of more information on local health regulations, travel/health insurance, the possibility of returning to the UK in an emergency."
- ⊘ «C'était pas possible aller dans les Etats-Unis.»
- ⊘ "Went to Spain instead of California."
- ⊘ "Uncertainty on the dates."
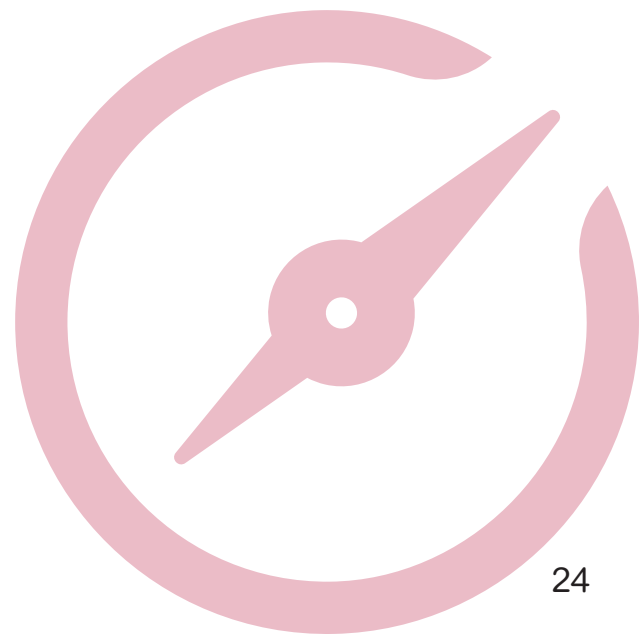
The graph below shows that on average students during the pandemic would have needed more support from the host and home universities. Two-thirds of students chose 1-3 on the scale in the respective statements. It also shows that the planning process was extended, however, they seemed to have managed to succeed in their courses to a large extent.

Statements on culture and language

Strongly agree   **Strongly disagree**

I want to learn the local language.

I value the opportunity to develop my English skills in the host country.

I prefer to choose a programme in English.

I prefer a host country which is culturally distant (very different from my home country's culture).

I prefer a host country which is culturally close to my home country's culture.

I would like to meet mainly local students.

I intend to stay within the international students' community.

I am very interested in the local culture.

2.1.2.10 Suggested improvements

Not all students on mobility were lacking information in their orientation and decision process. Some of them explicitly mentioned that they were not lacking anything ("My university provided all the information"; "Our coordinator prepared us well"). Those who had missed some information mentioned the following subjects:

Organisation/planning:
- Checklist of items to pack for the trip
- Information on financial support
- Information on job opportunities within university
- Health care support and assistance
- Visa information
- Documents needed for the destination country
- "I'm a first student from my home institution in this mobility and no one was able to describe past experiences."

Studies:
- Information on teaching staff
- Information on courses, e.g. their difficulty
- Learning agreement/Course matching
- Information on free place in the laboratory
- Information on quality of teaching
- More details on thesis

Living:
- Information on life in host country
- Information about common space, intimacy...etc.
- Accommodation in the office house
- Presentation on real student life out there
- More photos from location
- Cost of living information
- Public transport

Covid 19 pandemic:
- More information related to Covid 19 (evolution, …)
- Information on vaccination
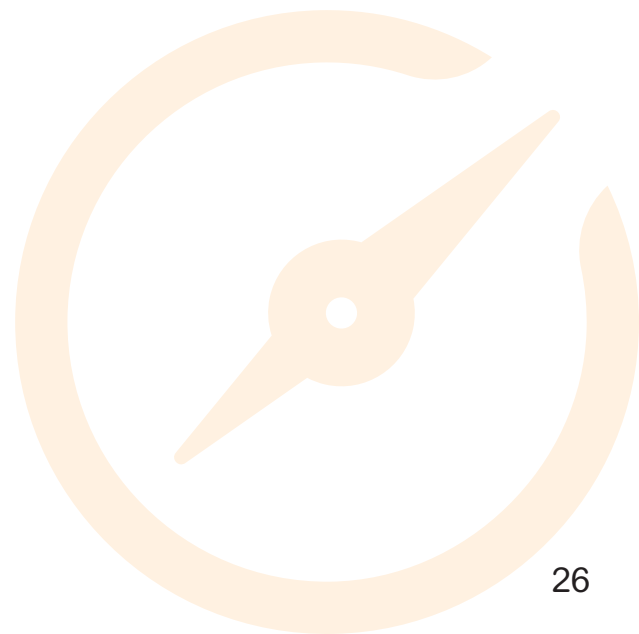
The lack of information is usually closely connected to the lack of support. Here, we collected the following aspects of still missing support:

- Better support from international university officers
- Better communication with and more information from professors/teachers
- Financial support/ Availability of scholarships
- Job opportunities (within university)
- More guidance from/meetings with students who had previously been to host institution/ host country
- Precise step by step guides
- More support in the process of filling out the Learning Agreement
- Support form a personal advisor (one to one)
- Support from parents
- Healthcare and assistance especially dealing with the Covid 19 pandemic (e.g. fares for the Covid test)

Higher education institutions and other stakeholders could support the students' decision process better by providing the following items:

- Giving more information (online)
- Better communication ("Hiring people for this and possibly nice people who are able to talk with others"; "Relying on the things that the students say.")
- Providing the curriculum of host institution at the beginning of decision process, not after process of applying for mobility
- Reducing bureaucracy ("International offices should be more available and more competent. Documents should be easier to be found and filled out.")
- Standardisation of rules/procedures for participating institutions
- Doing individual (or with smaller groups of people) meetings for a more tailored support
- Providing a personal tutor through the whole mobility
- Holding regular meetings with mobility students
- Providing financial support and job opportunities within university
- Encouraging mobility earlier in the study programme (less linear curricula)
- Earlier grant agreement ("because we need to organise the outgoing mobility and there are a lot of costs that depends directly on the grant")
- Providing additional assistance during Covid19 pandemic

The answers to the statements below show that institutional support but also support from peers is not perfectly available. Students only feel on average rather informed, the level of satisfaction with current possibilities to get informed about mobilities reaches 3,39 (best: 5).

Statements on decision process

Strongly agree   **Strongly disagree**

I felt well informed in the phase of preparing my mobility.

It was easy for me to decide where to go.

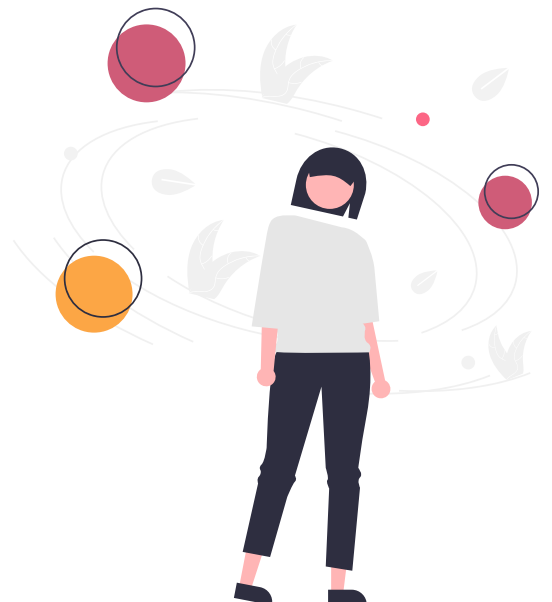I would have liked to have more support from peers.

I would have liked to have more institutional support.

I was very long undecided because of economic restraints.

I am satisfied with the current possibilities to get informed about mobilities.

2.1.3 Students back from mobility

2.1.3.1 Characteristics

Most of the students back from mobility went abroad for one or two semesters between autumn/ winter term 2019/20 and spring/summer term 2021. More than 60 % of the respondents had been abroad during the pandemic between autumn/winter term 2020/21 and spring/summer term 2021. We also reached some students who studied abroad between spring/summer term 2018 and spring/summer term 2019.
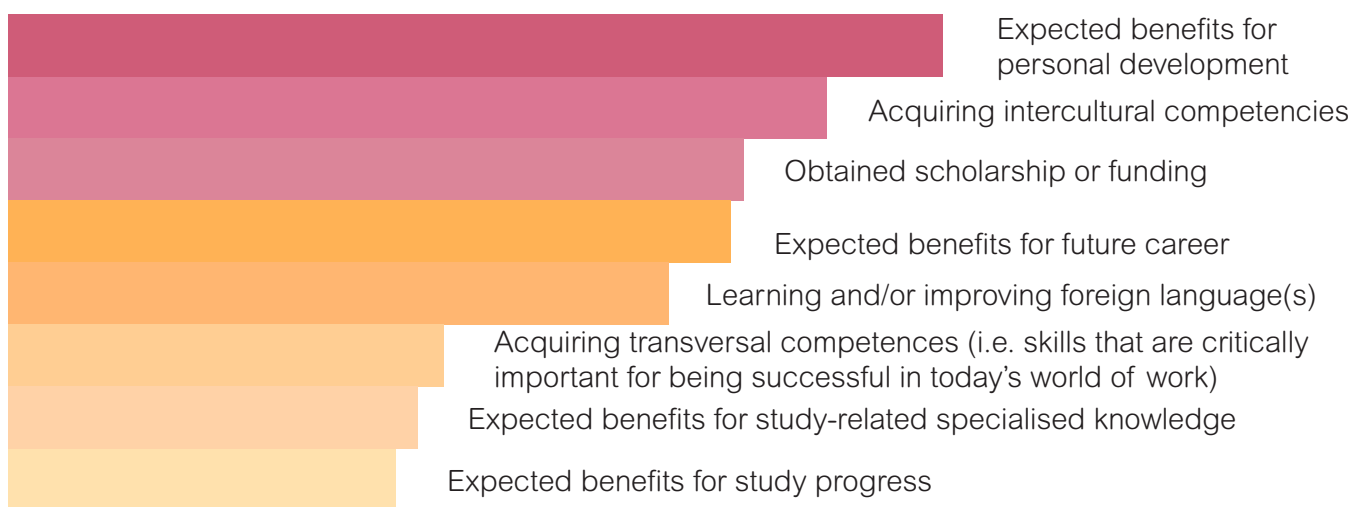
2.1.3.2 Planning Process

They went abroad for one semester (68 %), for 2 semesters (30 %), for 3 semesters (0,01 %) for 4 semesters (0,004 %) or for another period of time (0,02 %). Destinations were located in Europe (e.g. France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Czech Republic, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Rumania, Russia, Armenia, Malta, Greece, Cyprus in Asia (Jordan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Japan), in Africa (Morocco) and in America (USA, Canada, Mexico).

2.1.3.3 Motivation to go abroad

As for the motivational factors to go abroad, the first five factors in the ranking below are the same as for the group of students on mobility. Starting with "Expected benefits for personal development" as the highest factor in the ranking, the other 4 factors differ slightly in their order from the previous group. Family and relatives with experiences abroad seem to be less important than peers abroad. In addition, acquiring linguistic or cultural competencies are more important than expected benefits for their studies.

Motivational factors

Expected benefits for personal development

Acquiring intercultural competencies

Obtained scholarship or funding

Expected benefits for future career

Learning and/or improving foreign language(s)

Acquiring transversal competences (i.e. skills that are critically important for being successful in today's world of work)

Expected benefits for study-related specialised knowledge

Expected benefits for study progress

- o Dreaming of chosen country
- o Financial support from parents
- o Peers studying abroad
- o Valuing the reputation of chosen country
- o Family or relatives having experienced an international mobility

- o Other social links abroad (i.e. pen-friends, online community...)
- o Family or relatives abroad
- o Obligation in curriculum
- o Other social, economic, personal, academic, cultural, influencing factors

29

2.1.3.4 Application process

In addition to the steps listed below, respondents mentioned that it was necessary to have enough ECTS to go ahead or to have a decent grade average in exams. Furthermore, they needed to pass an extra English examination or other language tests.
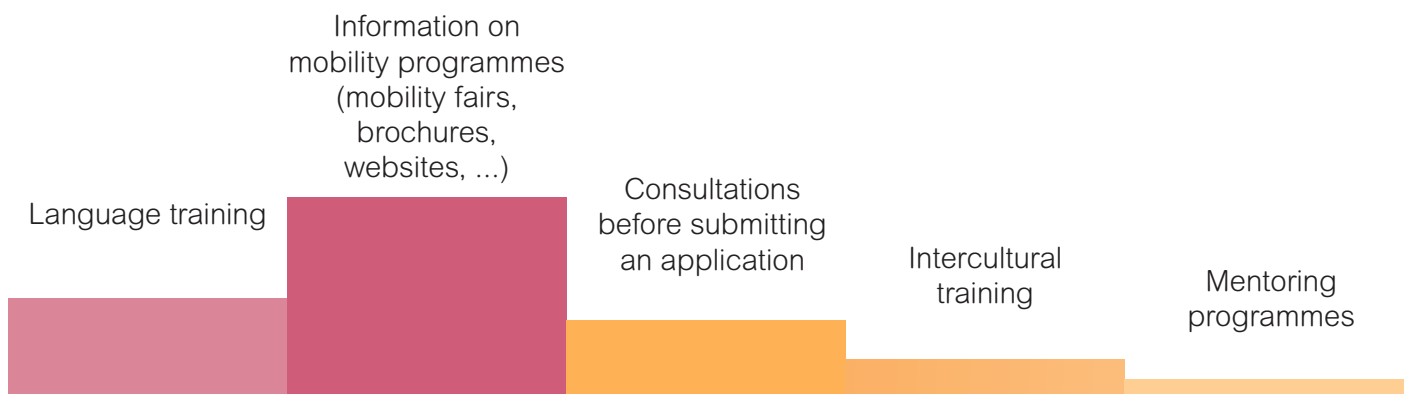
It was also noted that in addition to the general steps listed below a lot of initial steps and stages had to be handled individually. Again, the ranking was almost identical to the first two groups of students. Only 17 students needed to pass an intercultural training before their stay abroad.

Steps that a local student must go through

- ⊘ Getting information about application procedure
- ⊘ Getting information about mobility programmes
- ⊘ Filling the application files/Gathering of all the required documents
- ⊘ Organising the travel
- ⊘ Getting information about available financial support
- ⊘ Being successful in a formal selection procedure
- ⊘ Administrative procedures: visa, health insurance etc.
- ⊘ Getting to know testimonies from students with a mobility experience
- ⊘ Passing an intercultural training

In the graph below, we see that the offer of cultural training is more than twice as high as the requirement to pass it. Otherwise, the support for students does not differ very much from the previous groups described in this research.

Support available for students applying to go on mobility

Language training | Information on mobility programmes (mobility fairs, brochures, websites, ...) | Consultations before submitting an application | Intercultural training | Mentoring programmes
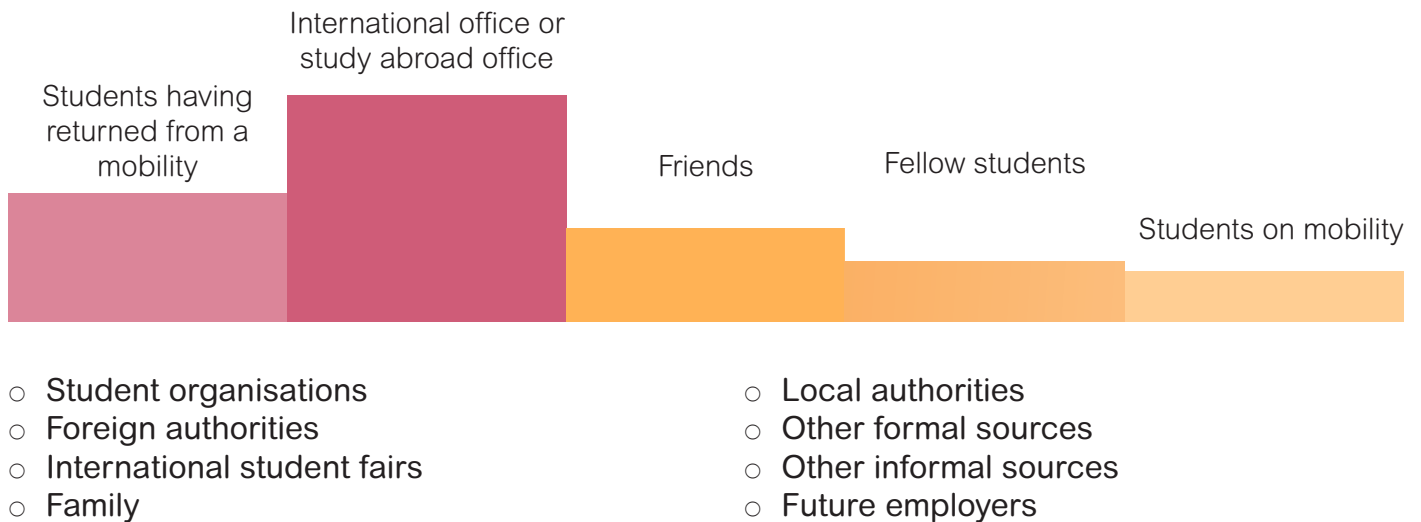
72 % of the higher education institutions required students to complete an online application form when they prepared their mobility project. As in the group of students back from mobility studies abroad, study abroad visits from a couple of years ago are included (in contrast to the students in mobility or planning their mobility), we remark a clear trend toward more online application requirements within the last few years.

2.1.3.5 Sources and channels of information

The graph below shows the sources of information which were used by students back from mobility. They considered the students planning to go on mobility and the students on mobility as the most useful and most reliable sources "the students having returned from mobility", "the students on mobility" and "the International office or study abroad office". "Student organisations" as a source of information was ranked higher than the other two groups.

Information sources

- ○ Student organisations
- ○ Foreign authorities
- ○ International student fairs
- ○ Family
- ○ Local authorities
- ○ Other formal sources
- ○ Other informal sources
- ○ Future employers

The graph below shows the channels of information that were used by students back from mobility in their planning process. The ranking is identical to that from the first two groups of students. Like the other groups, students back from mobility are considered as most useful and as most reliable channels "websites" and "personal information". They believe that "television" and "radio" were least useful or reliable (with values around 3 or more on a scale from 1 =most useful/reliable and 5 = not at all useful/reliable).

Information channels
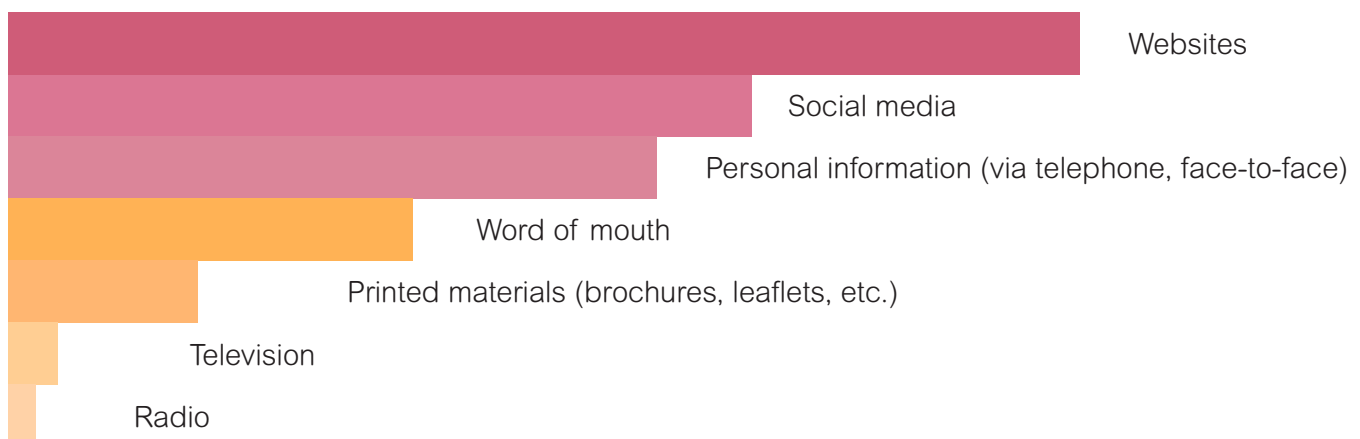
2.1.3.6 Selection criteria referring to the country of destination

The three most important selection criteria concerning the host country according to the respondents were the possibility and motivation to develop linguistic and cultural competences and the assumption that the country of destination would be an exciting place to live. Of especially minor importance are geographic proximity, historical and economic links or linguistic relatedness between home and host country. These results correspond to the results of the first two groups of students.

Importance of selection criteria (host country)

Most important

I consider the country of destination as an exciting place to live.

I want to develop my cultural competencies (related to the host country).

I value the opportunity to develop my skills in the language of the host country.

Less important

My home country and my host country are sharing the same language/are linguistically related.

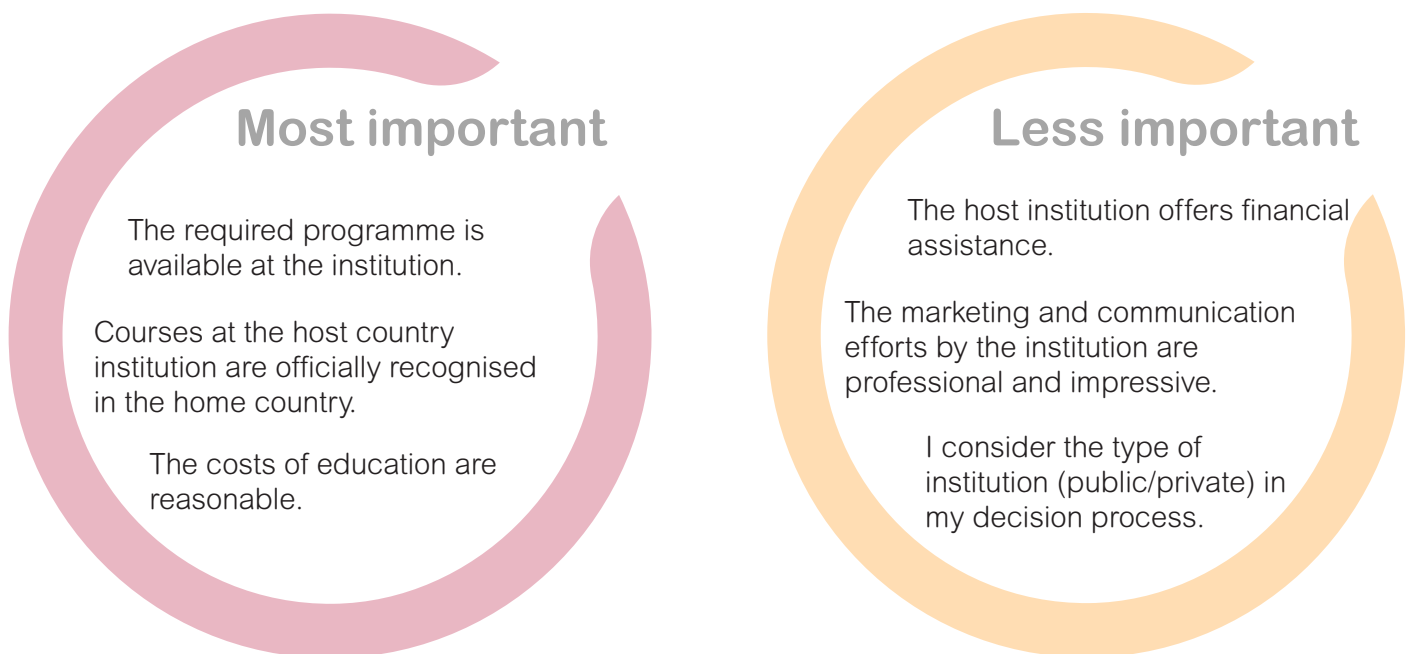I like the geographic proximity of the host country in relation to my home country.

There are historical and/or economic links between the host country and my home country.

- o I personally already have some knowledge of the host country.
- o I appreciate the (comfortable) climate of the host country.
- o The costs of living in the host country are reasonable.
- o I value the political and social security in the host country.
- o I think that there is a low discrimination rate in the host country.
- o I think that there is a low crime rate in the host country.
- o I appreciate the study climate in the host country.
- o I especially appreciate the availability of (science) programmes in the host country.
- o There are already well-established exchange programmes between my home and the host country.

2.1.3.7 Selection criteria referring to host university

As for the selection criteria relating to the host university, we found that almost all items below were considered as being rather important than being unimportant (being less than 3 on average). Formal (availability of study programme and recognition) and financial issues (costs of education, availability of scholarships) were most important. Retrospectively, marketing efforts by the institution, financial assistance by the host university or the type of institution seemed to be less important to students back from mobility.

Importance of selection criteria (host institution)

Most important

The required programme is available at the institution.

Courses at the host country institution are officially recognised in the home country.

The costs of education are reasonable.

Less important

The host institution offers financial assistance.

The marketing and communication efforts by the institution are professional and impressive.

I consider the type of institution (public/private) in my decision process.

- The academic reputation and/or prestige of the institution is outstanding.
- The quality of the faculty and education programmes is excellent.
- The expertise of the teaching staff is great.
- Teachers have good practical knowledge or links to the industry.
- The institution offers specialised courses relevant to professions and/or employers.
- Course design and teaching methods are up to date.
- Courses are available in English.
- The use of information technology and online learning is standard.
- I was pleased with the class sizes and the learning environment of the host country institution.
- The profile of students at the host country institution is interesting.
- Graduation success is very likely.
- I value the location of the institution.
- There are well established joint education programmes between my home country institution and my host country institution.
- Scholarships are available.
- I relied on my friends'/relatives'/teachers' recommendations.
- There are attractive extracurricular activities in the institution.
- I had a good impression from campus visits.
- There are good infrastructural facilities at the institution (including public transport).

2.1.3.8 The role of culture and language

Interest in the local language, immersing into the local culture and meeting locals are also big motives for students back from mobility. Still, there is another large student community which prefers courses in English and to develop their English skills (that could be in some cases the local language but not always).

Statements on culture and language

Strongly agree   **Strongly disagree**

I want to learn the local language.

I value the opportunity to develop my English skills in the host country.

I prefer to choose a programme in English.

I prefer a host country which is culturally distant (very different from my home country's culture).

I prefer a host country which is culturally close to my home country's culture.

I would like to meet mainly local students.

I intend to stay within the international students' community.

I am very interested in the local culture.

2.1.3.9 Impact of Covid 19

Two thirds of the students did not remark any change in their behaviour due to the pandemic when it came to information collecting. But one third experienced a change. So, students in the group being back from a mobility project were less concerned by the pandemic in their planning phase, also because many of them went abroad before times of Covid 19. However, those involved in the pandemic reported on the following modifications and complications concerning their information collecting:

- ⊘ "Everything was online, it was more difficult to obtain information from my home university."
- ⊘ "It was hard to communicate with the assistants given to support me in the process."
- ⊘ "There was difficulty in contact with the coordinator from my home university."
- ⊘ "Things that could be made in person, are completely online and the professors are not that available responding to multiple emails."
- ⊘ "No direct information was possible just online applications. Few meetings with the professor to prepare ourselves to the Erasmus project."
- ⊘ "Hardly any information from my home institution (no information concerning the application process, scholarships ...)."
- ⊘ "Everything online, no more information days or recruiting process at the university."
- ⊘ "It has been tougher to have face to face confrontation with teachers and peers that have already studied abroad."
- ⊘ "Much information has been released late."
- ⊘ "Many of the forms that are usually required only in physical (paper) form were now required to be emailed."
- ⊘ "Because the situation was unpredictable and I had to collect and check the information and papers needed again and again."
- ⊘ "Remote sessions of orientation."
- ⊘ "Training conferences were cancelled."
- ⊘ "Offices were closed during lockdown in March-April 2020."
- ⊘ "Information was changing rapidly."
- ⊘ "I had to do everything last minute because of uncertainties of both home and partner university."
- ⊘ "Uncertainties, everything is unpredictable."
- ⊘ "Some courses changed because of Covid 19 circumstances."
- ⊘ "To evaluate my application took 3 times the time as usual."
- ⊘ "It limited the choices of host countries."
- ⊘ "New rules to enter in country abroad, Covid test costs."
- ⊘ "I had to return earlier."
- ⊘ "Procedure at embassy was different (visa application), host university changed some paper-based processes to digital."
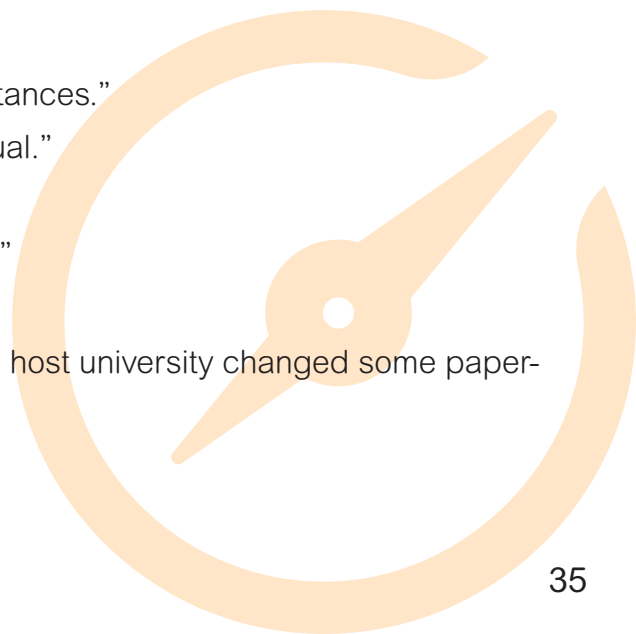
The graph below shows that on average students during the pandemic would have needed more support from host and home universities. Three quarters of the students did not get any additional support from home and/or host university (they chose 1-3 on the scale in the respective statements). This is a higher proportion than in the group on mobility and partly explainable because not all of them were not concerned by the pandemic as mentioned above. However, the statements above show that support in many cases was even reduced compared to pre-pandemic times.

Statements on the COVID 19 situation

Strongly agree   **Strongly disagree**

The pandemic affected my choice of the host country.

The pandemic affected my choice of the host country institution.

The pandemic extended my planning process.

The pandemic shortened my planning process.

I postponed my mobility because of COVID 19.

Because of COVID 19, I chose an institution with well established online teaching and learning possibilities.

Statements on the COVID 19 situation

Strongly agree **Strongly disagree**

Because of COVID 19, I stayed at home and took online courses abroad
instead of a physical mobility.

I had additional support from my host country institution during the planning
process of my mobility because of the pandemic.

I had additional support from my home country institution during the planning
process of my mobility because of the pandemic.

I went abroad for a mobility during the pandemic and felt isolated in the host country.

I went abroad for a mobility during the pandemic and managed
to succeed in the courses that I chose.

The pandemic shortened the length of my mobility.

It is worth noting that students often faced huge problems and frustrating situations due to the pandemic not only in the planning phase, but also during their stay abroad:

⊘ "My Erasmus, it has been different of my expectations, about what people explained to me, because the classes are online, you don't receive enough help by teachers, we can't go party (but it's ok, because I prefer to do tourism) and the most important thing is that we can't socialise enough with resident people and it's difficult to learn the language."

⊘ "Since the suspension and further transition to online classes, it becomes worthless to stay in the country locked in a bedroom, funded by huge exchange taxes."

⊘ "The Covid 19 pandemic unfortunately caused classes to be taught by remote teaching, which has made it impossible to experience cultural exchanges and the very idea of studying in a different class from my home university."

⊘ "Some of the students, I initially, studied abroad with, were called back from the country due to the pandemic. My classes and curriculum and extra-curricular activities all became online."

2.1.3.10 Suggested improvements

Not all students back from mobility were lacking information in their orientation and decision process. Some of them explicitly mentioned that they were not lacking anything ("I almost knew everything, before I had arrived."; "I had every information in the decision process."; "I did not lack any information. I had an internship for my master´s thesis abroad, so it was not as difficult to organise as courses at university."). Those who missed some information mentioned the following subjects:

Organisation/planning:

- "I would have loved to have more information with regards to application process."
- Information on deadlines, submission periods
- Information on steps to do for the application, steps to do after having been accepted
- Information about destinations, mobility opportunities, etc.
- Information about the insurance
- Brochures from the university, information about the host university
- Academic calendar
- Former students' experiences
- Information on governmental restrictions
- "It was difficult to get online a lot of information about the kinds of extracurriculars offered at my host institution."
- "My institution did not have all the information."
- "I didn´t have much information about my host faculty (not university, because from the University of Porto they used to reply to me quickly and they explained everything really well to me)."

Studies:

- ⊘ Information about subjects at the host university

- ⊘ "The study programs. We only got them, after we had decided the university."

- ⊘ "It was difficult to find out more details from the intended institution regarding the courses and what they covered before the semester had already started."

- ⊘ "How the courses will be held and when the lecture will start and what would be the modality of the lectures (Zoom or presential)."

- ⊘ Information about the modules

- ⊘ Information regarding how classes are conducted, e.g. class size, assessment

- ⊘ Information about learning agreement, receiving institution and courses

- ⊘ "How the learning agreement has to be done. How to find accommodation. How to fill out every form. What forms."

- ⊘ "No one has explained to me exactly which courses to choose at the host university."

- ⊘ Information on system of valuation

- ⊘ "Information about grading and converting the ECTS to my home university's credits."

- ⊘ "Most basic information, the most important being how and if the subjects taken will be accepted at home."

- ⊘ Information on teaching quality

- ⊘ Information on effective course availability

- ⊘ Information on the different language programmes

- ⊘ Information about the research activities available for thesis

Living:

- ⊘ Information on prices and additional costs

- ⊘ Information upon the culture and way of living for the chosen mobility destination

- ⊘ Information on where to look for apartments ("I couldn't find accommodation.")

- ⊘ Information about the actual costs of accommodation

- ⊘ "In retrospect, more information about other organisations other than Stage Malta facilitating services for students and about accommodations in host country, as students we spoke to found that there are a lot accommodation in a more central location, with better facilities and more reasonable prices than those offered by Stage Malta."

- ⊘ Information on housing fraud

- ⊘ Practical advice

Covid 19 pandemic:

- ⊘ "Well, the pandemic only appeared around halfway through my study abroad experience, so that was unexpected. Also, I experienced a few natural disasters during my time there, financial help was offered but not given."

- ⊘ "The arrive of a pandemic"

The lack of information is usually closely connected to the lack of support. Here, we collected the following aspects on missing support in the mobility decision process:

- More information about the process of application and the process of actually preparing for mobility
- Knowing exactly how the process was going to work when applying ("Step-by-step process")
- Talking to person with responsibilities both from home and host universities
- Improving the communication with the host institute's professors and the home institute
- An advisor with all the information
- Help with choosing courses
- A formal presentation from the international board of my university, a meeting with students back from mobility to get testimonies and help with preparing the departure
- Additional meetings with fellow students and lectures who have experienced mobility
- Testimonies from past students at the host institution regarding the academic courses
- More feedbacks from students that had been in the same host institution
- Better explanation of receiving Erasmus grants
- "A buddy system with a local student, a supportive administrative team, and clearer communication."
- "I would have appreciated my home university telling me about the buddy programme."
- Insurance and Covid tests
- Support when applying for accommodation/housing
- More support from home university
- More support from mobility office
- Some financial help from my university, more money, scholarship
- Financial support for the flight tickets and some technical support for the many applications and bureaucracy procedures
- Updated subjects in the host institution
- More information on types of assessments, and how Covid impacted it
- Personal contact before the flight
- Support from friends
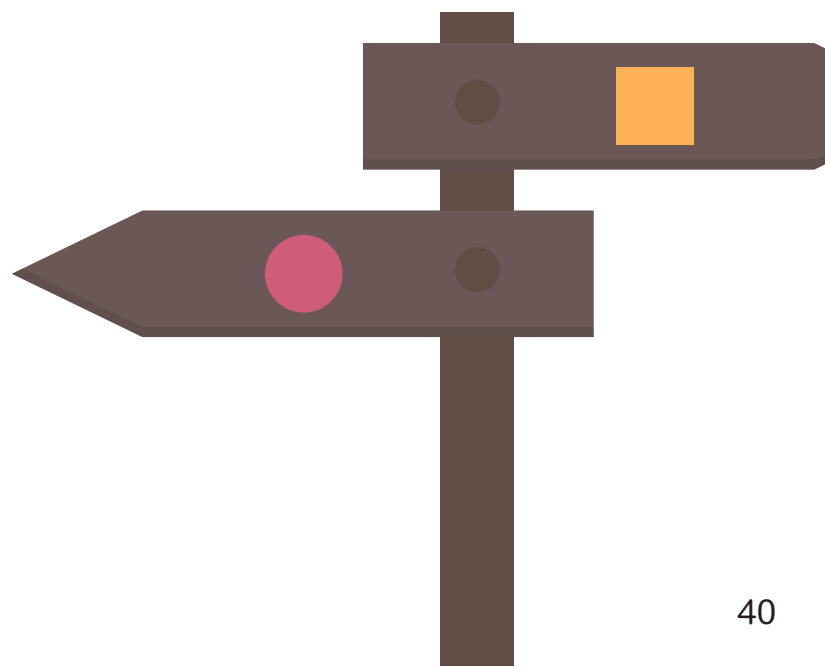
40

Higher education institutions and other stakeholders could support the students' decision process better by providing the following items:

- Invitation of students to participate in the mobility programme
- Promoting the programme more
- Having a special website for mobility students
- Complete information about legal and organisational procedures
- Sharing more about other Erasmus+ programs and not only about students mobility
- Financial support by concluding employment/study/internship contracts during the Erasmus internship
- More support from home university
- More support from my home university and speed of response
- Making the process easier/more transparent
- Encourage students at the beginning of the programme, so that they can be well prepared
- Clearer and easier learning agreements
- Make clear what support is available
- Highlighting the fact of receiving the Erasmus grant: "Thus, many students would go, if they would know about additional financial support."
- More financial support
- Helping students to find the right institution and monitoring the home and the host institutions
- By doing as much as possible online without the need to be there in person
- Improving the communication with students
- Having a better mobility office
- Creating a bigger and more connected network of students and graduates from similar exchange programmes
- Enhance the international and exchange communities, facilitating and reducing the bureaucracy and paper procedures
- Hosting live introduction programme
- "I wish I had student fairs or contact with local students before I went there."
- Providing contact to the host university or students who have already gone on mobility in advance
- Organising meetings with students just returned from mobility abroad
- Allowing at least skype or zoom calls in person with the students
- Providing case studies and testimonials from students who have completed their study abroad in specified locations
- Making more meetings and sharing content and information in their social media
- Promoting much more the opportunities students have
- Mentoring programmes
- Better explanation of the life abroad
- Providing more information in the context of Covid, the education methodology and teaching language
- Giving more grants due to Covid expenses

The answers to the statements below show that support from peers but also institutional support could be further developed. Students only felt only on an average level (3,19) informed, when they prepared their mobility project, whilst the level of satisfaction with current possibilities to get informed about mobilities reaches 3,4 (best: 5).

Statements on decision process

Strongly agree   **Strongly disagree**

I felt well informed in the phase of preparing my mobility.

It was easy for me to decide where to go.

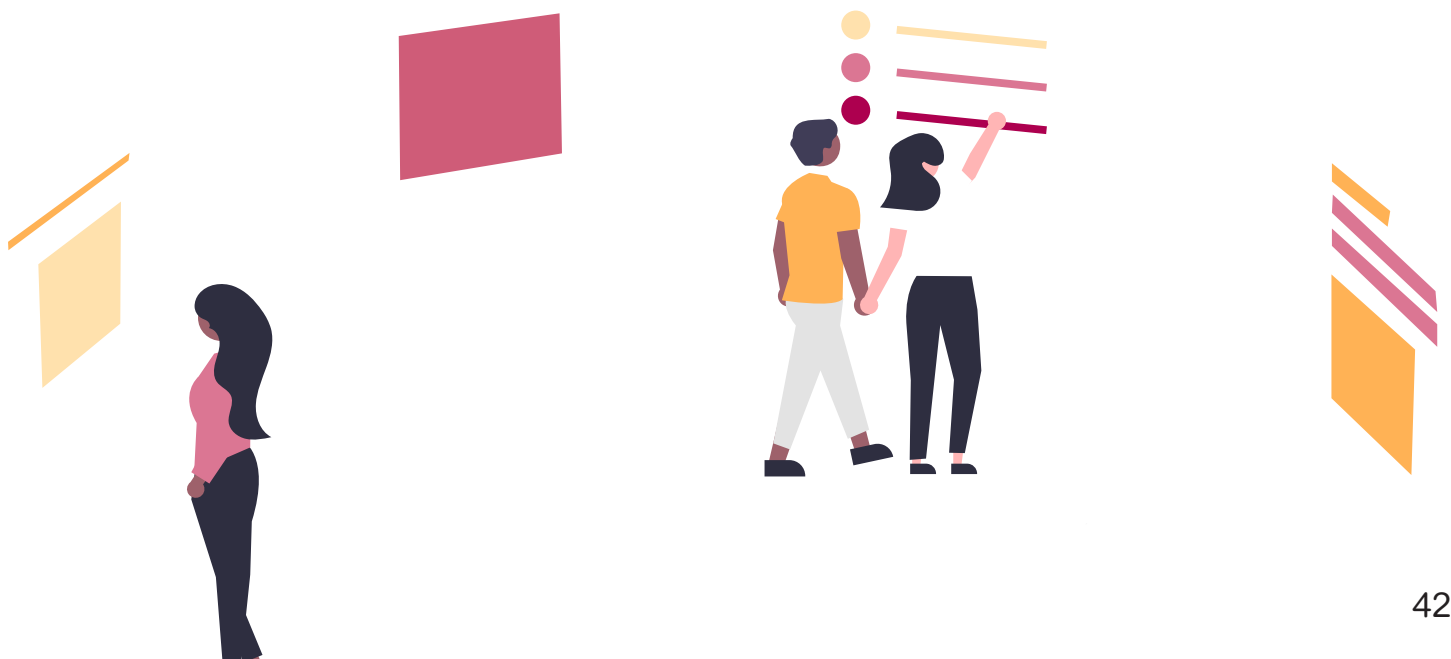I would have liked to have more support from peers.

I would have liked to have more institutional support.

I was very long undecided because of economic restraints.

I am satisfied with the current possibilities to get informed about mobilities.

2.1.4 Students having given up a mobility project

2.1.4.1 Characteristics

The majority of students having given up a mobility (59 %) wanted to go abroad for one or two semesters between autumn/winter term 2020/21 and spring/summer term 2021. More than two third of the respondents planned to go abroad during the pandemic including autumn/winter term 2021/22.
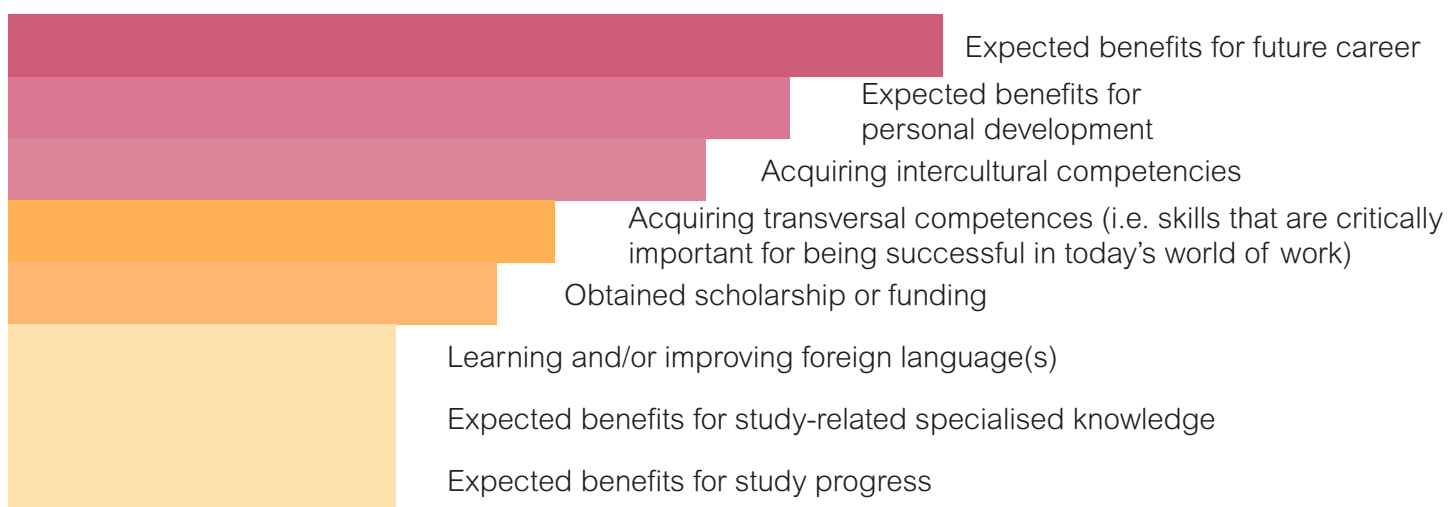
2.1.4.2 Planning Process

They planned one semester of study abroad (55 %), 2 semesters (21 %), 3 semesters (3 %), 4 semesters (15 %) or another period of time (6 %). Destinations were located in Europe (e.g. France, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Rumania, Russia, Armenia), in Asia (China) and in America (USA, Brazil).

2.1.4.3 Motivation to go abroad

As for the motivational factors to go abroad, the ranking of the factors below differs slightly from the other groups. The first eight factors are the same, starting here with "Expected benefits for future career" as the highest factor in the ranking and as the second highest "Expected benefits for personal development", which scored highest in the other groups. Family and relatives abroad seem to be less important than peers studying abroad, whereas family or relatives who have had an international mobility experience appears more often as an influencing motivational factor. In addition, acquiring cultural and transversal competences are more often mentioned by the respondents than learning and/or improving a foreign language.

Motivational factors

Expected benefits for future career

Expected benefits for
personal development

Acquiring intercultural competencies

Acquiring transversal competences (i.e. skills that are critically important for being successful in today's world of work)

Obtained scholarship or funding

Learning and/or improving foreign language(s)

Expected benefits for study-related specialised knowledge

Expected benefits for study progress

- Family or relatives having experienced an international mobility
- Dreaming of chosen country
- Financial support from parents
- Valuing the reputation of chosen country
- Peers studying abroad

- Other social factors
- Obligation in curriculum
- Other social links abroad (i.e. pen-friends, online community...)
- Other social, economic, personal, academic, cultural factors

43

As for the reasons why students quitted their mobility project, due to the investigated semesters the Covid 19 pandemic was predominantly cited. However, a lack of information is on rank 3 and a lack of institutional support on rank 5, a critique that was highlighted by the other groups of students quite frequently as well.

Reasons for quitting

COVID 19 pandemic

Private burden/
reasons

Lack of sufficient
information

Other

Lack of institutional
support
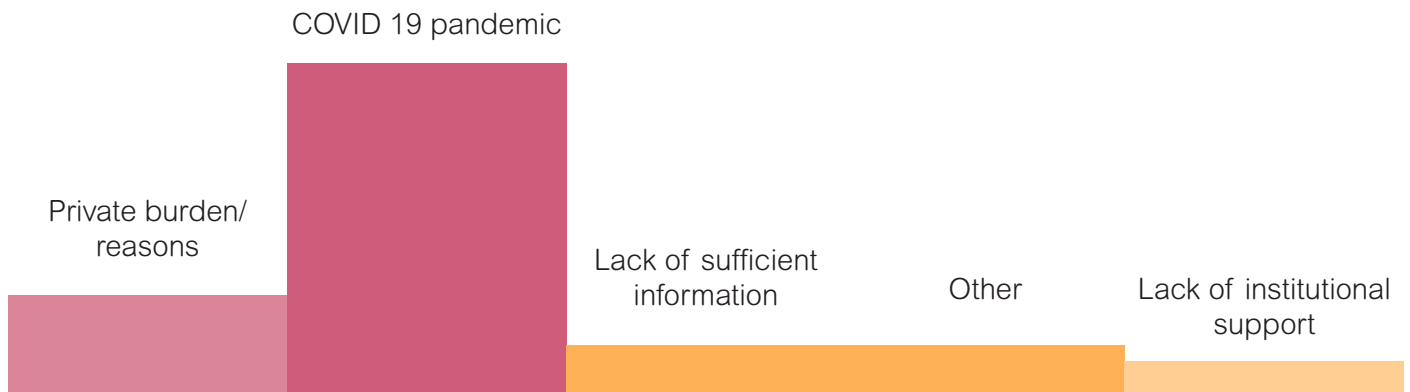
○ Challenges of academic workload
○ For financial reasons
○ Lack of support from parents

○ Work-related burden/reasons
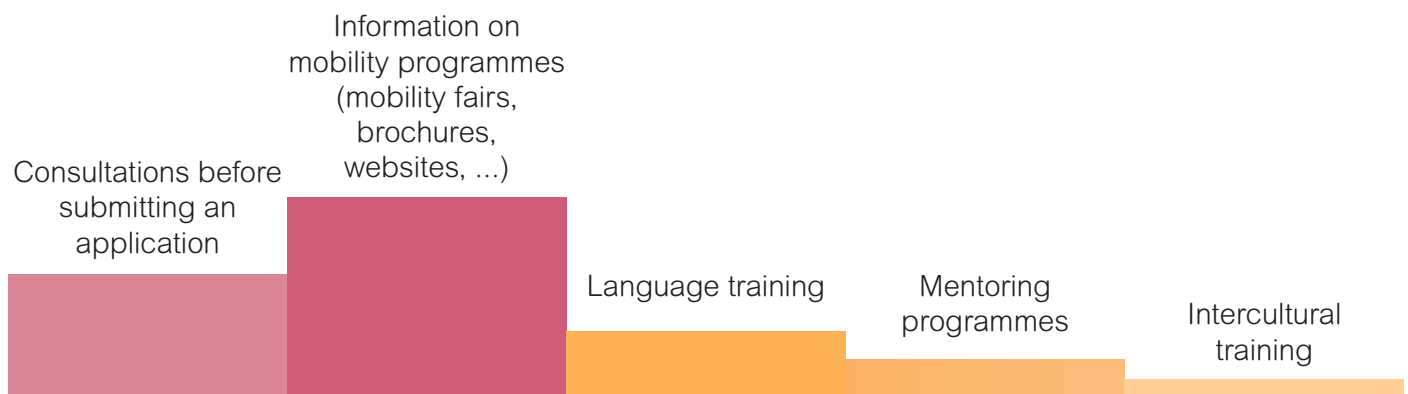○ Lack of support from peers

2.1.4.4 Application process

In addition to the steps listed below, one student mentioned that it was necessary to negotiate and get a study agreement that meets the academic needs required by the studies. The ranking differed slightly from those of the first three groups of students. Again only 4 students needed to pass an intercultural training before their stay abroad.

Steps that a local student must go through

- ⊘ Getting information about application procedure
- ⊘ Getting information about mobility programmes
- ⊘ Filling the application files/Gathering of all the required documents
- ⊘ Organising the travel
- ⊘ Getting information about available financial support
- ⊘ Being successful in a formal selection procedure
- ⊘ Administrative procedures: visa, health insurance etc.
- ⊘ Getting to know testimonies from students with a mobility experience
- ⊘ Passing an intercultural training

In the graph below, we see that the offer of cultural training corresponded to the requirement to pass it. Otherwise, the support for students did not differ very much from previous groups described in this research.

Support available for students applying to go on mobility

Consultations before submitting an application

Information on mobility programmes (mobility fairs, brochures, websites, ...)

Language training

Mentoring programmes

Intercultural training

Almost 100 % of the higher education institutions required an online application from students when they prepared their mobility project, 25 % also a paper application. This underlines the already identified tendency towards more online application requirements by universities.

2.1.4.5 Sources and channels of information

The graph below shows the sources of information which were used by students having given up their mobility . They considered like the other groups of students as the most useful and as most reliable source "the International office or study abroad office". Contrary to the other three groups of students, "student organisations" as a source of information were not used at all. This last option was not considered as being most useful (3,11) or reliable (2,71) on a scale from 1 = most useful/reliable to 5 = not at all useful/reliable.
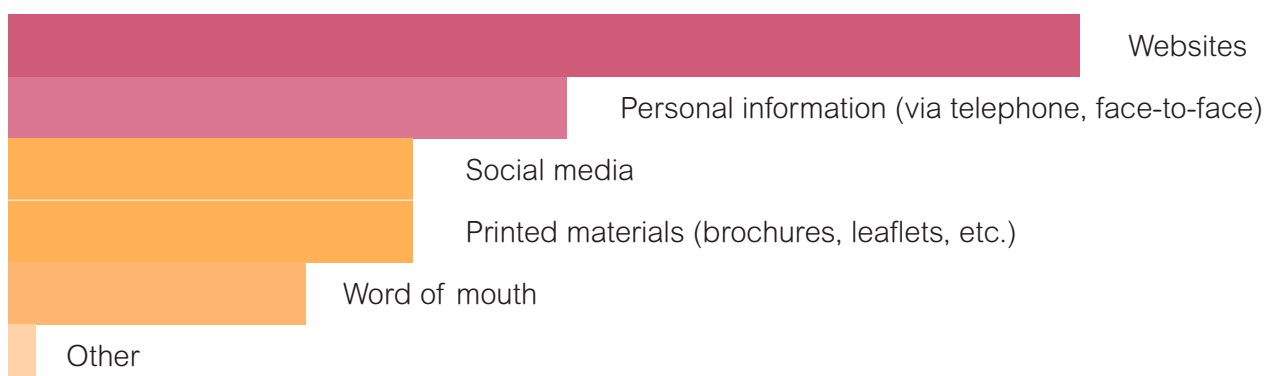
Information sources

Fellow students

International office or study abroad office

Students having returned from a mobility

Friends

Students on mobility
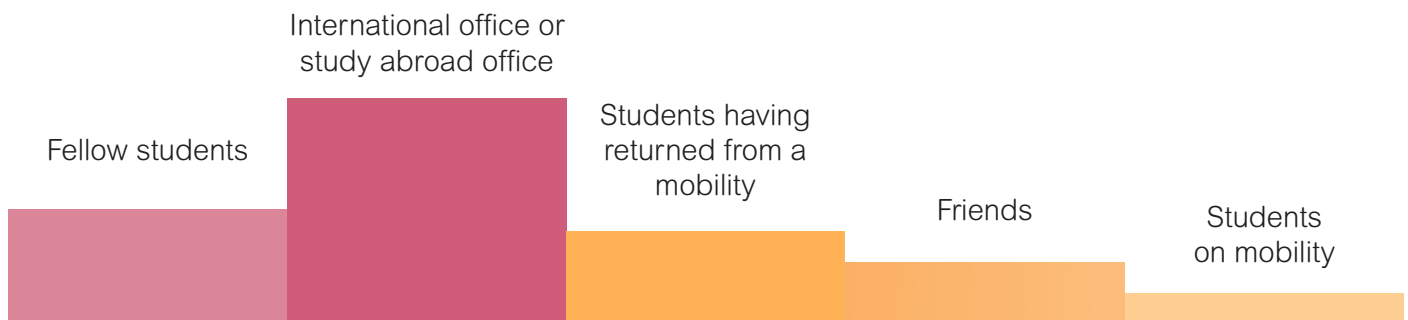
- ○ Foreign authorities
- ○ Family
- ○ Local authorities
- ○ International student fairs
- ○ Other formal sources
- ○ Future employers

The graph below shows the channels of information that were used by students having given up their mobility p. The ranking is only slightly different from those of the first three groups of students. Like the other groups, students back from mobility are considered as the most useful and as the most reliable channel "websites". Unlike the other groups, they then preferred "personal information" and "word of mouth". They were not so fond of social media compared to the other groups before considering mainly their usefulness and their reliability.

Information channels

Websites

Personal information (via telephone, face-to-face)

Social media

Printed materials (brochures, leaflets, etc.)

Word of mouth

Other

2.1.4.6 Selection criteria referring to the country of destination

The three most important selection criteria concerning the host country according to the respondents were the possibility and motivation to develop linguistic and cultural competences and the assumption that the country of destination would be an exciting place to live. Of especially minor importance are geographic proximity, historical and economic links or linguistic relatedness between home and host country. These results corresponded to the results of the first three groups of students. What is new is that the availability of (science) programmes in the host country was of great importance as well. Here, there could be a bias because of the relatively small number of respondents in this student category.

Importance of selection criteria (host country)

Most important

I value the opportunity to develop my skills in the language of the host country.

I consider the country of destination as an exciting place to live.

I especially appreciate the availability of (science) programmes in the host country.

Less important

My home country and my host country are sharing the same language/are linguistically related.

There are historical and/or economic links between the host country and my home country.

I like the geographic proximity of the host country in relation to my home country.

- o I personally already have some knowledge of the host country.
- o I appreciate the (comfortable) climate of the host country.
- o The costs of living in the host country are reasonable.
- o I value the political and social security in the host country.
- o I think that there is a low discrimination rate in the host country.
- o I think that there is a low crime rate in the host country.
- o I appreciate the study climate in the host country.
- o I want to develop my cultural competencies (related to the host country).
- o There are already well-established exchange programmes between my home and the host country.

2.1.4.7 Selection criteria referring to host university

As for the selection criteria relating to the host university, we found that almost all items below were considered as being rather important than being unimportant (being less than 3 on average). A lot more factors are seen as essential compared to the groups of students before (averages below 2). Only the type of institution seemed to be less important to students having given up their mobility .

Importance of selection criteria
(host institution)

Most important

The required programme is available at the institution.

Courses at the host country institution are officially recognised in the home country.

The quality of the faculty and education programmes is excellent.

Less important

Graduation success is very likely.

The profile of students at the host country institution is interesting.

I consider the type of institution (public/private) in my decision process.

- The academic reputation and/or prestige of the institution is outstanding.
- The costs of education are reasonable.
- The expertise of the teaching staff is great.
- Teachers have good practical knowledge or links to the industry.
- The institution offers specialised courses relevant to professions and/or employers.
- Course design and teaching methods are up to date.
- Courses are available in English.
- The use of information technology and online learning is standard.
- I was pleased with the class sizes and the learning environment of the host country institution
- The marketing and communication efforts by the institution are professional and impressive.
- The host institution offers financial assistance.
- I value the location of the institution.
- There are well established joint education programmes between my home country institution and my host country institution.
- Scholarships are available.
- I relied on my friends'/relatives'/teachers' recommendations.
- There are attractive extracurricular activities in the institution.
- I had a good impression from campus visits.
- There are good infrastructural facilities at the institution (including public transport).

2.1.4.8 The role of culture and language

Interest in the local language, immersing into the local culture and meeting locals were also big motives for students having given up their mobility . As in the groups, there was also a big part of students who prefer courses in English and who like to develop their English skills (that could be in some cases the local language but not always).

Statements on culture and language

Strongly agree   **Strongly disagree**

I want to learn the local language.

I value the opportunity to develop my English skills in the host country.

I prefer to choose a programme in English.

I prefer a host country which is culturally distant (very different from my home country's culture).

I prefer a host country which is culturally close to my home country's culture.

I would like to meet mainly local students.

I intend to stay within the international students' community.

I am very interested in the local culture.

2.1.4.9 Impact of Covid 19

Two thirds of the students did not remark any change in their behaviour due to the pandemic when it came to information collecting. But one third experienced a change. Thus, the students having given up mobility were in this respect comparable to the students in the group being back from a mobility abroad. However, those influenced by the pandemic in their collecting of information reported the following modifications and complications concerning their information collecting:

- ⊘ "Online."
- ⊘ "The information available on the website was no longer reliable, because procedures were changed."
- ⊘ "More focus on health care system and eventual quarantine procedures."
- ⊘ "Absence of direct testimonies."
- ⊘ "I had to research what were the new requirements to obtain a passport to Austria in response to the pandemic; also what were my destination university's measures."
- ⊘ "I could not go there and ask specific questions."
- ⊘ "A lot of the research was left to me to do, I felt like there was a reduced level of support in finding out about options."

In contrast, the students indicated that the pandemic had influenced their planning (82 %). It influenced them in the following ways:

- ⊘ "The uncertainty."
- ⊘ "It made things uncertain so I had to give up on my mobility."
- ⊘ "It made the whole trip seem hypothetical – it was never certain whether or not it would take place."
- ⊘ "I have delayed the beginning of my exchange programme. I couldn't go to Italy and I had to watch classes at 3am."
- ⊘ "Postponed the start of classes and done everything online."
- ⊘ "I gave up on the idea, I didn't want to go abroad just to end up having classes online by myself in my room."
- ⊘ "The terrible management of pandemic by French government."
- ⊘ "Too many cases."
- ⊘ "It cancelled my mobility program."
- ⊘ "Had to cancel my mobility due to Covid 19."
- ⊘ "I renounced to my mobility due to pandemic situation in France."
- ⊘ "The programme has been shut down 2 months before the starting date."
- ⊘ "It was the reason why my semester abroad was cancelled by my home university."
- ⊘ "I planned everything, applied and got accepted, found accommodation, but in the last minute I cancelled my trip, because I felt that I couldn't live the whole experience due to the pandemic."
- ⊘ "Travel restrictions."
- ⊘ "I could not go to the UK."
- ⊘ "Impossible to depart for China due to the closing of boundaries."
- ⊘ "I had to cancel the mobility because I couldn't enter the country."
- ⊘ "I was afraid of the virus and that I couldn't do anything abroad because of the restrictions, so I didn't go."

The graph below shows how strongly this group of students was affected by the pandemic. It was the main cause to abandon mobility projects. Students would have needed more support from institutions which was obviously not the case.

Statements on the COVID 19 situation

Strongly agree   **Strongly disagree**

The pandemic affected my choice of the host country.

The pandemic affected my choice of the host country institution.

The pandemic extended my planning process.

The pandemic shortened my planning process.

I postponed my mobility because of COVID 19.

Because of COVID 19, I would have liked to choose an institution with well established online teaching and learning possibilities.

Because of COVID 19, I quit my project to go on mobility.

I had additional support from my host country institution during the planning process of my mobility because of the pandemic.

I had additional support from my home country institution during the planning process of my mobility because of the pandemic.

The pandemic did not play any role concerning my planned mobility.

My planned mobility would have been before the beginning of the pandemic.

2.1.4.10 Suggested improvements

Students were missing information in the following realms:

Organisation/planning:

- Information about logistic processes during application
- Real information about the requirements at the partner universities
- Communication with the host university
- Indication of possible difficulties when staying abroad
- Information on scholarships outside of home university

Studies:

- Everything about courses, internships and masters thesis
- Information about credit acceptance at my home university
- "Class and degree related information, what classes and courses to pick to be sure, it would fit in with the classes I take in my home country, so I would not be behind when I would have to come back."

Living:

- Information on accommodation

Covid 19 pandemic:

- "Which institutions offer online learning in the case of border closures?"

The lack of information is usually closely connected to the lack of support. Here, we collected the following aspects on missing support in the mobility decision process:

- The view of students who went on mobility programmes
- Accurate information about requirements of the universities proposed
- Visas
- More availability by email and reception services
- A more guided procedure in applying to the host institution
- Courses in English at the university
- More information about online learning
- How to cope with certain issues: at the start of an academic semester, arriving late to a course, having to start online etc.
- Scholarships outside of my home university

Higher education institutions and other stakeholders could support the students' decision process better by providing the following items:

- ⊘ By showing the opportunities: "I wasn't really given clear information about the universities, I could choose from."
- ⊘ Help with paperwork
- ⊘ Better advising of students who want to go on mobility
- ⊘ Ensuring that online learning will be provided by the host university before making a commitment
- ⊘ More reliable information
- ⊘ Giving more opportunities
- ⊘ Motivating students to go abroad

The answers to the statements below show that support from peers, institutional support and the process of information could be further developed. Students only felt only on an average level (3) informed, when they prepared their mobility project, the level of satisfaction with current possibilities to get informed about mobilities reaches 3 (best: 5).

Statements on decision process

Strongly agree   **Strongly disagree**

I felt well informed in the phase of preparing my mobility.

It was easy for me to decide where to go.

I would have liked to have more support from peers.

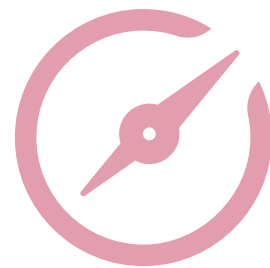I would have liked to have more institutional support.

I was very long undecided because of economic restraints.

I am satisfied with the current possibilities to get informed about mobilities.

2. EMPIRICAL STUDY

2.2. Qualitative study

2.2.1 Local students preparing a mobility

2.2.1.1 Characteristics

Among the 10 respondents who were interviewed, two third are female and one third male. They are aged between 20 and 30 years. The students are stemming from France, Italy, Czech Republic, Austria, Great Britain and Hungary. They study psychology, (civil) engineering, languages (e.g. Spanish, Russian, English, French), marketing, international business and applied linguistics. They are all multilingual with linguistic proficiency in up to five languages (e.g. French, English, German, Italian, Spanish, Czech, Slovakian, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Russian).

2.2.1.2 Planning Process

Local students preparing for a mobility were planning to go to France, Spain, Belgium or Canada either for one semester or a whole year. Some of them did not know yet, if their first preference was accorded to them. Their alternative destinations would have been in France or Ireland. Interestingly, the local language would have been the same as in their first preference. In their planning process, many respondents had already chosen their host country and institution. Therefore, they were either preparing the application process or preparing mentally the mobility, collecting and filling in documents, working on their learning agreements or looking for accommodation.

In the planning process they were facing different challenges. Coming closer to the date of departure, they were worried about finding a place to stay, a room, an accommodation. The concern of finding a friend (e.g. via a group on facebook or entering into contact with the local Erasmus section to find help) in order to share a home was mentioned. In addition, some of the respondents were anxious about cultural and language barriers and consequently tried to learn the local language or improve their already existing linguistic competence and attended language courses (e.g. in Catalan) or tried to learn the targeted language informally (e.g. by listening to podcasts). Some of them were already involved in planning the journey (taking the train or a plane?), while others felt uneasy because of the academic challenges posed by the host university, as in these cases the host university had a very good reputation in the respective field. However, we also found someone who had a lot of help in the planning process and did not face any problems at all when preparing his/her mobility.

Respondents were partly influenced by peers and family members in their decision process. Some friends who also will go or had been on mobility as well as ESN people advised to go on a (certain) mobility project. In some cases, the students' parents influence the decision positively.

2.2.1.3 Motivation to go abroad

The main reasons to go abroad that were mentioned included the following:

- ⊘ Respondents mentioned that they wanted to „live this experience".
- ⊘ They wanted to do a study abroad project since they were a child.
- ⊘ They love to travel.
- ⊘ They love a specific foreign country.
- ⊘ They thought it was their last chance to do something like that (before they had to start to work).
- ⊘ It was highly recommended to do a mobility by their friends and/or ESN people.
- ⊘ It was highly recommended or required by their home university.

The students preparing a mobility expected many benefits from their planned study abroad experience. They also hoped to develop a lot of personal, social and expert skills. They hoped to improve their linguistic skills (in English and/or the local language). On the personal level, they anticipated to become more flexible and open, and to grow or develop personally in the new environment. As for cultural and social skills, students were convinced to improve them as well, as they would get to know a lot of new people and new cultures. They would find new friends and gain new knowledge about a different country and city and its people. Some focused on the new academic possibilities and on the fact of gaining different knowledge in their study programme. With regard to organisational skills, it was mentioned that new practical experiences concerning, for instance, housing could be made. Some of the respondents were fond of getting to know new sports.

2.2.1.4 Information and application process

Most of the respondents had already passed the application process. They were occupied with preparing their learning agreement which often posed most of the problems to be solved. Information on courses were partly difficult to get or find. The students got support from different institutions and/or persons:

- ⊘ From the local ESN section
- ⊘ From the home university (study abroad office)
- ⊘ From both universities
- ⊘ From the Erasmus Office
- ⊘ From the (local) coordinator
- ⊘ From a specific professor at the home university

In one case there was no support from or contact with the home university apart from funding issues (grant).

Local students planning their mobility project were using the information channels below:

- ⊘ Home and host university websites (chat with other students about location, outdoors, sports, etc.)
- ⊘ Social media (e.g. Facebook groups, Instagram)
- ⊘ YouTube (testimonies)
- ⊘ Governmental and foreign ministry websites
- ⊘ Students coming back from mobility
- ⊘ Talking to different people

55

2.2.1.5 Sources and channels of information

With regard to the country of destination, we could identify three main selection criteria. Some students simply adore a specific country or aim at getting to know another culture and new positions.

> "For me, immersing myself in a different culture and gaining different perspectives. I know that, so for me, from the central or eastern part of Europe, UK is already like a culture shock but it's still, I perceive Canada as a more liberal country, and it was interesting for me that Quebec actually is a little bit different from the whole federal level, so it was interesting for me immersing myself in that and I am curious what kind of perspectives I can gain." (GP5)

Others want to improve their linguistic skills in the local language for personal or future professional reasons ("becoming a Spanish professor"). And the last criterion is connected to the availability or quality of a study programme. Not all programmes are available in every country.

2.2.1.6 Selection criteria referring to the country of destination

The reasons for choosing a specific university are closely connected to the reputation of the institution, the quality of professors (passion, expertise, student per teacher ratio) or personal links to the institution ("knowing one professor there").

2.2.1.7 Selection criteria referring to host university

In this section we investigated the impact of language and culture on the decision process. We asked if learning the local language was still a motive for international students to go abroad. Answers were mainly positive, however, it was not necessarily seen as the main reason to go abroad, but it was considered to be a good and important motive.

> "Yeah, I think that's right because I already contacted my buddies in Belgium and we are talking a lot and they are teaching me new words in Dutch and that's really great." (IP2)

> "Definitely. For me it was, and for some of my course mates that I know was definitely a motivational point, because immersing in the environment and in the, where people speak actually that language, it helps a lot. […] and then again being in the UK, although closed up because of Covid but still shopping for like restaurants or bars, or meeting with my course mates, with teachers, tutors, so it's completely different, and for me it's definitely a motivation. For others that I know, for them as well, maybe the others not so much." (GP2)

When asked about the preference of staying primarily within the community of international students or meeting mainly local students, respondents would like to have contacts to both communities, but some of them have a higher preference for meeting locals, especially when they are highly interested in the local language and culture.

2.2.1.8 Impact of Covid 19

The situation was quite different when students were questioned about the perceived impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on their mobility. One part did not notice any challenge or consequence ("The situation is back to normal, no influence, I'm vaccinated."; "No impact, if there is still a pandemic, there are still some classes at school, because only four students in the programme."). Others have a completely different view on this topic.

"Yes, I think that Erasmus mobility is a great opportunity, and the Covid cause some difficulties but I believe that beyond that we'll not have similar opportunities in the future, let's say it is worth to have some difficulties during the mobility to have one of the or even the best experience of your life … " (IP3)

"I think Covid's been the biggest challenge." (GP5)

2.2.1.9 Suggested improvements

Some of the students were highly satisfied with the current offer of support and information. They were not lacking any kind of information in their decision making in the planning phase and all their questions had been quickly answered when needed. Others complained about the still needed support that they had not received from their home university and/or host university. For example, they would have liked their home university to explain to them how the website of the host university works. They were lacking reliable information on housing and scholarships, helpful hints and suggestions concerning the pandemic or information on the differences between various host universities. It was mentioned several times that the pre-departure information should be sent or handed out by the home university much earlier (already before the decision about the host institution, i.e. already during/before the application process) and that administration and specifically filling in the learning agreement (choosing the right courses) was highly complicated when educational/university systems differ a lot. In such cases, students would need a lot more assistance in order to accomplish the preparation phase more efficiently.

Most importantly, students would suggest a better connection, communication and cooperation between home and host universities.

"Some things should change on a bureaucratic and organisational level, there is not enough communication between the host and home university, I think the communication is very important when there is a problem I know a lot of people that have had problems because there was lack of communication between the unis, that's a problem when talking about the application process, so I think the first things I would like to change is the communication between unis, between professors in specific subjects, but I'm very lucky because there is communication between my universities but there are a lot of people that need the help." (IP3)

2.2.2 International students on mobility

2.2.2.1 Characteristics

We interviewed 7 international students on mobility, 50 % female and 50 % male. They are between 19 and 27 years old. The students are stemming from France, Czech Republic, Great Britain and Austria. They study management, civil engineering, languages, international business and biology. They are all multilingual with linguistic proficiency in four to five languages (e.g. English, French, Korean, Russian, Ukrainian, Slovakian, German, Dutch, 3 Indian languages: Gujarati, Punjabi, Urdu).

2.2.1.2 Planning Process

The students on mobility went to Spain, France, Italy or to South Korea, either for one summer (internship) or one or two years of study abroad. One alternative destination would have been California.

In the planning process, before entering into their mobility project, they were facing different challenges. The person who went to South Korea was nervous about immerging into a totally different culture. He moved from France to South Korea. Another student finds it difficult to live on his own for the first time in life. One student who studied in Spain had issues due to insufficient linguistic competence in Spanish. Courses were available in English, however, these classes were also difficult to follow. In addition, the students on mobility were largely affected by the Covid 19 pandemic. It was not clear how the quarantine regulations would work and in one case, classes were only held online in the first semester with lots of technical problems and lacking social interaction possibilities. Apart from the fears already mentioned above, the planning process was characterised by causing troubles linked to getting information on time (long waiting periods in getting email responses from host university professors) and, as a result, having difficulties in filling in the learning agreement (problem of choosing on time courses fitting to the programme of study at the home university, recognition issues). Because of Brexit, students from Great Britain were facing additional administrative work when entering Spain (student visa). The student who went on internship abroad needed to change the employer, which caused additional administrative work as well.

Respondents were partly influenced by their peers in their decision process. Some friends (or colleagues in the dormitory) as well as ESN people and specific professors or ancient superiors at work advised them to go on a mobility project.

2.2.2.3 Motivation to go abroad

Students on mobility named several reasons why they went abroad:

- ⊘ They thought it would be such a good experience.
- ⊘ They wanted to meet new people and to get to know new cultures.
- ⊘ They intended to create new habits.
- ⊘ They were interested in practical work/professional life experience (internship).
- ⊘ They like to travel a lot.

"So going abroad has always been something that I've always been fond of, but I think when I started working for the first time, I was 16 years old, and I actually worked for an estate agency. I started as a receptionist and then I started working with lettings and I saw my boss constantly take time off work to travel and to go everywhere and then he'd come back after 2 weeks and show me all the pictures. […] There's so much of the world and I feel like it would be life wasted without seeing all of it and you know travelling all over the globe has been my dream since that point. […] It's just, when the opportunity showed itself to me, I took it with both hands and was like, yeah I want to do this." (GP4)

The international students on mobility expected benefits from their study abroad experience on the personal level (being independent, believing in oneself, being more open to different people), on the organisational level (learning self-management, time management, being able to care about oneself) and on the linguistic level (practising English, learning and practising the local language). Moreover, they believe that their expert knowledge and skills will grow and that they will discover new academic perspectives and attitudes towards life.

2.2.2.4 Information and application process

The international students on mobility were supported by different institutions and/or persons:

- ⊘ Home university coordinator (helping with learning agreement, giving advice, flexibility in case of creating a new learning agreement for a new employer)
- ⊘ Study abroad team
- ⊘ Host university
- ⊘ Friends in in the host country (Spain)
- ⊘ ESN people
- ⊘ (new) Employer (e.g. lending money in case of broken ATM)

The respondents were using the information channels below:

- ⊘ YouTube (videos on what is necessary to pack)
- ⊘ ESN group in host country
- ⊘ Social media (Facebook groups, Instagram)
- ⊘ Websites
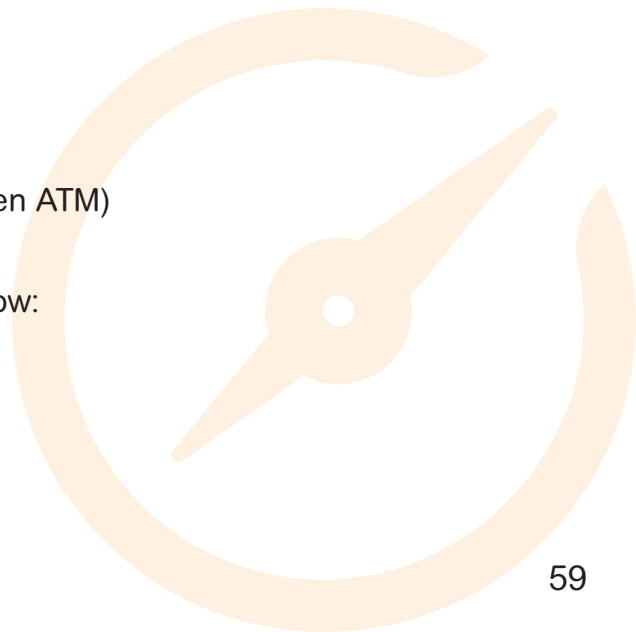
2.2.2.5 Selection criteria referring to country of destination

Host countries were predominantly chosen because of personal preferences. Some students were fond of the nice place (close to the sea) and the pleasant weather at the destination.

> "If you want to study and learn something, go to northern countries and if you want to meet a lot of friendly people, have fun, stay at the beach, go to the 'warm' countries." (IM2)

Others followed recommendations from friends having been there already or the appealing information on the website of the home university. One student was aiming to work in the future in the target country.

2.2.2.6 Selection criteria referring to host university

The reasons for deciding on a specific university were closely linked to qualities of the country (price level, attractive place) and the university academic reputation (good level of expertise and teaching quality). A knockout criterion would be the availability of the course or field of study. Another relevant factor is the presence of the international student community (student life).

2.2.2.7 The role of culture and language

International students on mobility were quite aware of the importance of language and culture. Its impact on the decision process is hardly ever doubted. Learning languages is a motive for everyone, but not necessarily the main reason to study abroad.

> "For sure I think it's the main reason why I choose to go, also to improve my English, to learn new languages like Spanish." (IM1)

> "I mean, you don't need to go somewhere because of the language. You have to know some English at least but you will have to learn very fast because you have to, you're there." (IM2)

We also could identify different preferences linked to the two student communities, the international students and the local students. Some of the respondents favoured the international group, whereas others would like to meet more often local students in order to immerge into the foreign language and culture.
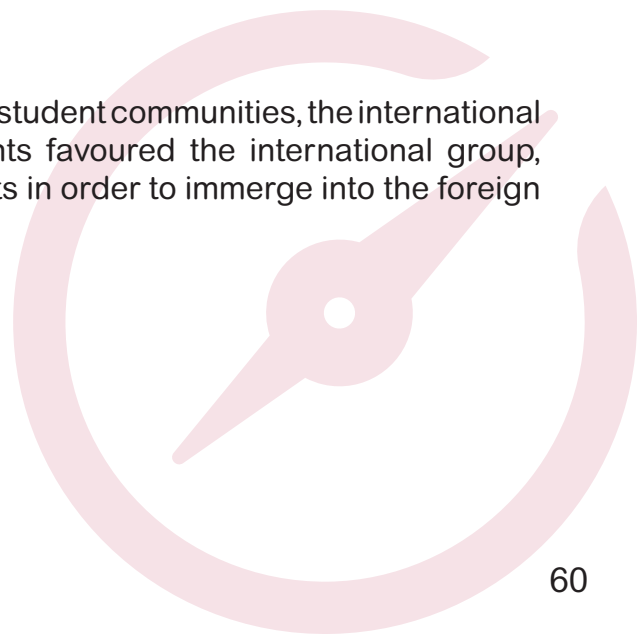
2.2.2.8 Impact of Covid 19

The Covid 19 pandemic impacted a lot the mobilities of international students. But it did not so much influence the decision process itself, at least not on the side of the students. Nevertheless, one study abroad project was broken up by the host university because of Covid 19. Having online courses only, and not being physically present in the foreign country, can be difficult for students. It hinders entering into contact with other students, and learning success is often hindered or reduced because of technical and linguistic obstacles. In this context, it was reported that hybrid classes were more efficient.

> "I think the worst thing was Covid, this was such a problem for me, but I take the opportunity and make the best of it, to travel so much. Because when I went there in September, I was in school only two times and then everything was closed, it was like lockdown we couldn't leave Andalusia, south of Spain, and we could travel only between cities there, I couldn't go to Madrid and everything. But next semester they opened everything and it was so much better, but it was also exam time so I couldn't travel so much." (IM1)

> "No influence on decision making, but: "there's like special rules because of Covid, you need to have test 72 hours before you go there, so I made an appointment for the test and the rules changed two days before and it was like, 48 hours instead of 72. And I had a plane on Sunday – so I was kinda where I could take the test but in the end, I managed to get it, just google and it worked. It was just this." (IM2)

2.2.2.9 Suggested improvements

The international students proposed measures to improve the orientation and planning phase in the realm of communication, administration and information. Again, the communication between home and host university should be further developed. The procedure and requirements around the learning agreement could be simplified. In some cases, there is a lack of information concerning the visa process (Brexit), the offer of accommodation and on the future employer (internship abroad), as well as the Covid 19 regulations in the different countries. In order to select the host university properly, a rating system on host universities would be helpful, as well as the availability of a platform with information on the teachers' quality and expertise.

2.2.3 Students back from mobility

2.2.3.1 Characteristics

We interviewed 15 students having come back from their mobility project(s). Most of them were studying abroad for one semester or one year, some went abroad twice for studying purposes or to do an internship in addition to their studies. Two third of the respondents are female and one third male. They are aged between 21 and 27 years. The students are stemming from Slovenia, Lithuania, France, Italy, Czech Republic, Austria and Great Britain. They study languages (e.g. Italian, English, French), management, marketing, international business, history, political sciences, geography, chemistry, biology, medicine and applied linguistics. They are all multilingual with linguistic proficiency in up to six languages (e.g. French, English, German, Swedish, Lithuanian, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Slovenian, Croatian, Czech, Slovakian, Polish, Russian, Creole, Mandarin, Urdu, Punjabi, Pothwari).

2.2.3.2 Planning Process

Completed mobility projects took place in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Singapore, Great Britain, Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Sweden or Latvia. Planning processes varied a lot in length. Some students were planning their mobility for one year or longer, others needed 9 or 4 to 5 or even 1 to 3 months for preparing their mobility. When thinking back to their planning and orientation phases before their mobility, students identified the following challenges:

- Writing the letter of recommendation
- Not finding much information on the website of the host university
- Getting quick responses on emails (e.g. from host university)
- Finding and financing housing (especially when outside campus)
- Coping with the visa process (contacting the consulate, having an interview)
- Managing administration (to get the paperwork done)
- Facing financial challenges (e.g. health insurance)
- Being confronted with less or no support in the case of internships abroad
- Being anxious about leaving alone for the first time in life

Students coming back from mobility brought up different actors who supported them in their planning phase:

- Home university (office support with documentation, e.g. learning agreement for studies or internship abroad, coordinator at home providing useful information on host country
- Host university
- StudyNet guidelines
- ESN section
- Future employer

2.2.3.3 Motivation to go abroad

We discovered the reasons listed below for going on a mobility project:

Wishing to live in a different country

Gaining experiences with different cultures and languages

Improving linguistic competences, developing specific linguistic competences like speaking the foreign language

Encountering different (academic) perspectives, gaining intellectual benefits

Getting to know another university system

Broadening one's own horizon, growing personally

Being more employable, trying to find work in host country after having finished studies

Being "forced" to go abroad because of obligation in one's course of study

„Always dreamt of"

"I would say it's a big benefit if, you know, you are applying for some job and they see that you've already been in many places and you've been adapting to many cultures, many different, so it's like a good point that, I would say, helps you for the employability as well." (GP3)

"I was always curious about this idea and I think what motivated me the most was stories of other people, I mean seeing their faces full of love and joy and those great emotions and I was like I see that that is something very special but I don't know, I've never done that so I was curious what is so special about Erasmus, what is happening there, why people are after it, you know?" (IP1)

The respondents partly were influenced in their decision making by their family and friends. In some cases, the students already had friends from the host country in their home country, who pushed them to go there.

When it comes to the expected benefits, we can distinguish between personal preferences or benefits (e.g. meeting new people, experiencing a new culture) and anticipated academic benefits (e.g. learning to know a new perspective in the discipline, like practical versus theoretical approaches or getting to know other didactical concepts, like class competitions, case study competitions, etc.).

2.2.3.4 Information and application process

Students often received information about the application process on the portal of their home university. Typical steps would have been:

- Getting different forms to be downloaded,
- Writing a motivational letter,
- Compiling one's own CV,
- Going back to the office and signing everything.

Depending on the host country or the students' nationality, information on the external visa process (contact information of consulate) was provided as well. Usually, there were various account managers for different regions at the host university, whom the applicants could email and ask specific questions (e.g. whether students could live off campus).

Other information channels that were used by the students are the following:

- Website of home university (StudyNet)
- Website of host university
- Websites of the city and/or country of destination
- Local websites on housing and accommodation
- Google: reviews from Erasmus students
- Office of host university
- Studying abroad representatives
- Pre-departure meetings
- Study abroad fair
- Other students
- Leaflets
- Facebook groups in host country

2.2.3.5 Selection criteria referring to country of destination

Students chose a specific country of destination because of personal preferences ("It has always been on my bucket list.", "One of my favourite countries") or because they already knew the local language and intended to improve their linguistic competences. In some cases, the availability of courses of studies in a country was the main criterion as well as a specific expected academic experience ("Popular destination for business studies"). Moreover, the costs of living, travelling costs, the country's weather and climate all influenced the decision. Past experiences of peers in a certain country were important, too. Students sometimes prefer to go to a place where other students had been previously.

2.2.3.6 Selection criteria referring to host university

The respondents selected those universities, where the respective course modules best fitted to the course modules of their studies at home. Partner universities were preferred. Students also were looking at the place and environment of the university (by watching videos on relevant websites) in order to get a better picture of the social and cultural life on campus. The academic ranking of a university was a major selection criterion as well as future job options in the chosen city.

2.2.3.7 The role of culture and language

We found that language played an important role when choosing the host country. The intention to become more proficient in the local language was a central motive for many students.

"I had quite a good level before I went to Italy but the whole point in going and studying was to increase my oral competence and be able to practice the language so that really improved in Italy, because we were studying in an Italian university and we were studying in Italian, so that was an opportunity to meet native Italian speakers." (IP2)

However, some considered language learning mostly as an additional asset of studying abroad and not as the main purpose of their mobility .

"I would say that for university students they tend to go to countries that have already sort of, that already speak a language that it's familiar to them, I would say, and that's different for somebody who studies Spanish as part of their degree, and for instance somebody who's Spanish would love, I would say would love to go to a Spanish speaking country and study there. But for students who really, I mean couldn't pursue any other, or don't speak any other languages I would say, I wouldn't say language is a motivation factor for them, because it's also very difficult I'd say if you're really not familiar with the language, it's difficult to study it, and then sort of whilst you're studying for your degree." (GB1)

"To some extent. I think most students they just want to have fun or they just want to experience another culture, travel. I think these are the foremost reasons. […] Language is like a bonus, plus, you know, in a lot of countries you can get by day-to-day life without the language, so I think there is that as well. Like even in Berlin to some extent you can get away without knowing the language, but then again you would encounter like the bank or something where you would need German, or you will be sent emails where you will need to know German." (GP3)

Respondents reported partly some difficulties in making friends with local students. Originally, they would prefer not to stay primarily within the community of international students, they would have liked to socialise with anybody regardless of their origin, however, they sometimes ended up staying within the community of international students.

"In my first semester I really wanted to stray away from like just other students that I knew that were coming from Hertfordshire and stuff like that,I wanted to make friends with international students as well as local students, but I did find that local students are quite reserved." (GP2)

"Well I would say both, because well I had friends from… but I'm an international student myself, so in some way I think there's this, a common understanding that sort of international students sort of bond well with each other, because I mean they're alone, and they have friends that are in the same position as they are, and a lot of the domestic sort of students already know each other, so they've always formed connections." (GB I)
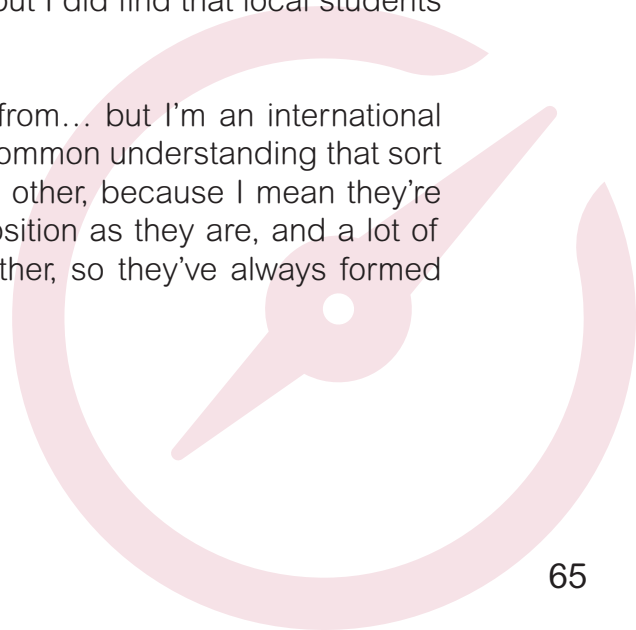
2.2.3.8 Impact of Covid 19

We interviewed students who did their studies abroad before or during the Covid 19 pandemic. Those who went abroad during the pandemic partly faced additional worries and challenges. It was possible that they had to postpone their mobility to the following year and therefore were obliged to repeat the application process. Others changed their planning completely and decided at the last minute to go abroad (because of eventual travel restrictions). Those who went abroad were confronted with intensive online studying. Altogether, we can say that the pandemic impacted the planning and orientation phase as well as the actual experience abroad in many ways.

> "I'm not going to lie, it did because obviously when you're sitting at home just doing your studies it can become just really tiring, I mean, you just, you live and you just live in this room, you just sleep in this room and I'm now working in this room, so it did for a little bit whenever I'd feel like I was falling down into a hole I'd sort of just pick myself up because I was like I still need this motivation to push me through my final year and like I am looking forward to it, to be fair, because I think we're going to be able to go back on campus, from my understanding, there'll be..." (GP2)

> "No. I was determined to do it like irrespective of the pandemic, but I was unsure if it was going to be possible because of the pandemic. That was the only issue in my mind. I wanted to do it irrespective." (GP3)

2.2.2.9 Suggested improvements

To some extent, students were lacking information in the following realms:
- Offered language courses at host university
- Optional prolongation of mobility
- How exchange programme are working (limited information on portal of home university)
- University system of host university
- Health insurance, visa, supporting documents
- Learning agreement (timetables, language of courses and exams, fitting of modules abroad to modules at home university, conditions for approval)
- Accommodation (off campus)
- Email address of contact person at host university

The students suggested several measures to overcome current difficulties:
- An earlier pre-gathering (during the decision process and not after having been chosen) with students from host university ("because I mean we had this opportunity later on, but I'd say not in the decision making process, but rather when we had to prepare for the departure, yeah." (GB I)
- An earlier pre-departure activity (information on fees, financial grants, available support and on different required forms when arriving and after returning)
- A virtual pre-departure activity with various partners, particular groups from different universities
- A better time management (earlier information on application process and its requirements)
- Information on academic benefits of a university
- Information on the environment and campus of the host university

In addition, they mentioned that communication between home and host universities should be improved, as well as the communication process between students and (host) universities. Students would appreciate being able to visit the city/university before they selected one.

2.2.4 Students having given up a mobility project

2.2.4.1 Characteristics

As highlighted before, we only could conduct 2 interviews with Italian students (one female and one male) who gave up their mobility project. Their fields of study were science of tourism and dentistry. Both are multilingual, native speakers of Italian and proficient in English, Spanish and one of them also in French.

2.2.4.2 Planning Process

The two students both went twice on mobility. Their first study abroad experiences had been in Albania and Spain. For the second mobility project, they both chose Spain.

Both interviewees did not face major challenges in the planning phase. They were well supported by their home university (study abroad office) or by their teachers at home. There were some communication problems with the host university, one student did not feel well informed about the place, possible contact persons for administrative questions and especially apartment options. Both students had to move to Spain first, before searching and finding the right place to stay. So their biggest challenge in the planning phase was the problem of housing.

2.2.4.3 Motivation to go abroad

The reasons why the students wanted to study abroad were closely linked to the expectation to develop their linguistic skills. They wanted to improve their Spanish. Besides, one student wished to study in a bigger city than at home. The other interviewee desired to have "this experience abroad" and aimed at raising his average, which according to him was easier to reach in Spain than in Italy.

> "Erasmus is very helpful also from the learning part because you can understand how maybe the same teams are treated different in another country and I think that my main motivation was also for the marks because […] you can get higher marks if you go to Spain." (IP1)
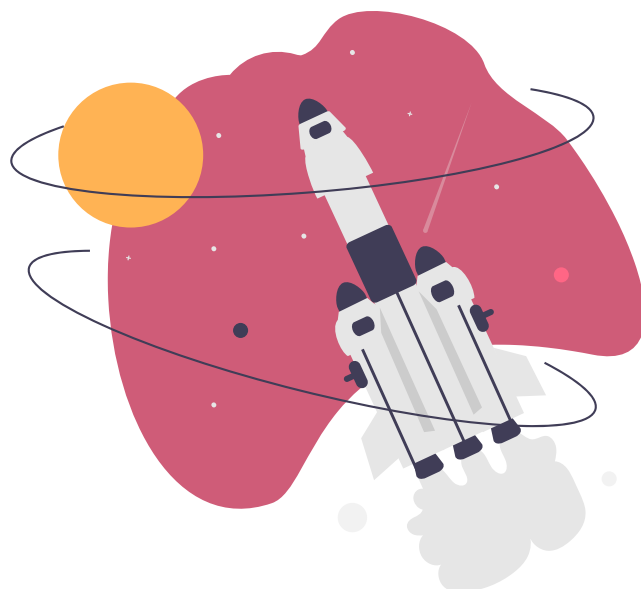
2.2.4.4 Reasons for having given up the mobility project

Both students broke off their second mobility project in Spain because of the Covid 19 pandemic.

> "Well, it was a tough moment for me, because in Spain it seems like a tragedy very more very much more than in Italy as they feed it and from Italy also the situation was not so well. So, we were me and my roommate alone in this house really in the centre of Seville and from which I cannot move. So, I have a bigger house in my hometown and I just prefered to come back after […] three weeks where there was the guardians in Seville that is like the army on the street and the situation looked like very tough." (IP1)

In addition, personal reasons and worries because of a sick person in the family at home was brought up by the respondent. Facing the pandemic, their apartments seemed to be too small to live there permanently (lockdown, online courses).

> "From one part, the fact that my department was good. But as Erasmus reasoning, you know, if you spend all day outside between lessons and class events and so on. It was good, but not at all to live, you know, just in that apartment all day." (IP1)

2.2.4.5 Information and application process

The students were well informed and supported by their home universities and local ESN people abroad. They contacted friends already studying in the host city, searched on websites and used a housing agency in order to find an apartment in Madrid. The communication and support with the host universities could be developed further.

2.2.4.6 Selection criteria referring to country of destination

The interviewees chose their host country because of personal preferences. One person did not really like the place of his/her home university and preferred in general to study in other places.

> "I was between Riga and Seville and my intention initially was to have a different experience in Northern Europe after a while, I say no well Seville is the best place to have an Erasmus, maybe it will be my last, so I should exploit it." (IP1)

2.2.4.7 Selection criteria referring to host university

The students appeared to be more interested in the city or country of the university than in the university itself. They had no special information or knowledge on the academic reputation or teaching quality of the institution, and partly not even a clear preference for a specific city or university.

> "No, I didn't choose Madrid because there was Madrid and Valencia, but I don't know where to go. I don't remember which university I put for the first thing in the requests." (IP2)

2.2.4.8 The role of culture and language

The interviewees were quite aware of the importance of language and culture. Learning the local language also was a principal motivation for them. One student thought that language learning could be a reason in general, although it was more important to have knowledge about the local culture according to her.
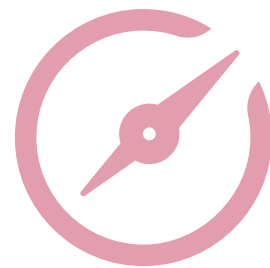
2.2.4.9 Impact of Covid 19

The Covid 19 pandemic was the main reason why both students disrupted their studies abroad. However, it did not at all influence the decision process itself, as the pandemic started when they had already been in the foreign country.

2.2.4.10 Suggested improvements

Both students had rather good experiences with their orientation and planning phase. As a result, they did not deliver many ideas on possible improvements. Again, the insufficient collaboration and communication with the host university was brought up. When it came to breaking up the stay abroad, it was difficult to get all the documentation needed for doing so properly. Consequently, information on what is needed when you need to finish your mobility earlier than planned and whom to contact could be provided in advance. It would also be helpful to get more support from the host university for housing. In one case, the courses listed in the learning agreement already were full which makes planning meaningless. What is listed in the learning agreement should, of course, be possible, reliable and binding.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

3.1. Best practices

The most positive feedback from students was stemming from planning situations where students got a lot of (individual) support from higher education institutions and other stakeholders involved in the planning process. Whenever cooperation between universities succeeded, it impacted positively on the level of satisfaction of students planning their mobility. The role of universities is also crucial when it comes to promoting mobility. It is essential that universities show and offer opportunities and motivate students to go abroad. This is the first step for a successful information and orientation phase of students planning to go abroad.

Students are especially grateful when they get support and help with their paperwork, when they get quickly all the information and advice they need. The learning agreement is a central part in the application and preparation process. Some home universities (and host universities) respond already positively to the needs of students to be as best as possible assisted in accomplishing this document. A well elaborated learning agreement encourages students afterwards to succeed in their semester or year abroad.

It is highly advisable to use all the resources and expertise already existing: The competences and expertise of experienced students after or during their own mobility is already available. However, it is not systematically used so far. The work of these ambassador students is highly valuable. The question, if it should be rewarded extrinsically or not, is not easily answered. It also depends on personal preference. There is a huge willingness and consent to engage oneself in helping other students in their orientation phase, after having come back from one's own mobility. At the same time, ideas linked to rewarding this engagement are divergent. There is a high consensus, that in principle, it should remain as a part of volunteering.

There is a huge urge within students to simplify the planning and application procedure. In this view, the idea of one single platform as a principal source of information and orientation in the planning process appeared very attractive to students.

Finally, the active role of the students planning to go abroad remains essential. To the basic question, how to prepare best and be successful in the mobility process, one interviewee remarked:

"I am preparing mentally I would say. Also documents - LA. I believe this - to face Erasmus in the best way. I think it's good to respect the lines of the university and be as persistent as possible. This is the secret to pass Erasmus without problems, respect the deadlines, prepare in the best possible way, filling all the papers, all the LAs, talking with the professor, if you have exams and you have doubts it's very important to talk with your tutor/professor of the university."

3.2. Quality requirements

In the information and orientation phase of students preparing for mobility, according to our interviewees and respondents, in many cases there is still room for improvement. Concerning the process of orientation itself, students were claiming the following issues:

- The communication with (home and/or host) universities should be more efficient. Response time to emails is frequently too slow.

- The administrative burden is high. Students ask for less paperwork and more support with the learning agreement. Information on courses at the host university is often not available, incomplete, outdated or not easily accessible. Exact information on studies and courses is needed much earlier than it is usually provided (for the learning agreement, for individual planning, for questions on credit transfers, but also for choosing the host university).

- Application procedures should be more standardised.

- In the application process, a comprehensive and complete to-do-list and packlists for the journey abroad would be helpful.

- Good contacts at home and abroad are necessary, but not always easily available.

- There is a need for having a single competent person (e.g. a buddy) as a contact in the preparing phase.

Concerning more specifically the future Compass platform, the issues mentioned subsequently are prevalent:

- The security of data has to be ensured.

- The topicality, accuracy and completeness of information should be guaranteed. Everything has to be up to date.

- The simplicity of information and guidance on websites should be aimed for.

- The reliability of testimonies has to be secured. "Accredited", reliable, trustworthy (student) representatives of host and/or home university and study abroad representatives have to be found.

- Authenticity of information and persons in charge should be striven for. The online platform should be fed by authentic and credible experiences of students.

- The platform should provide all the relevant information to make an informed decision.

4. ANNEXES

**View the full document
with the Annexes**