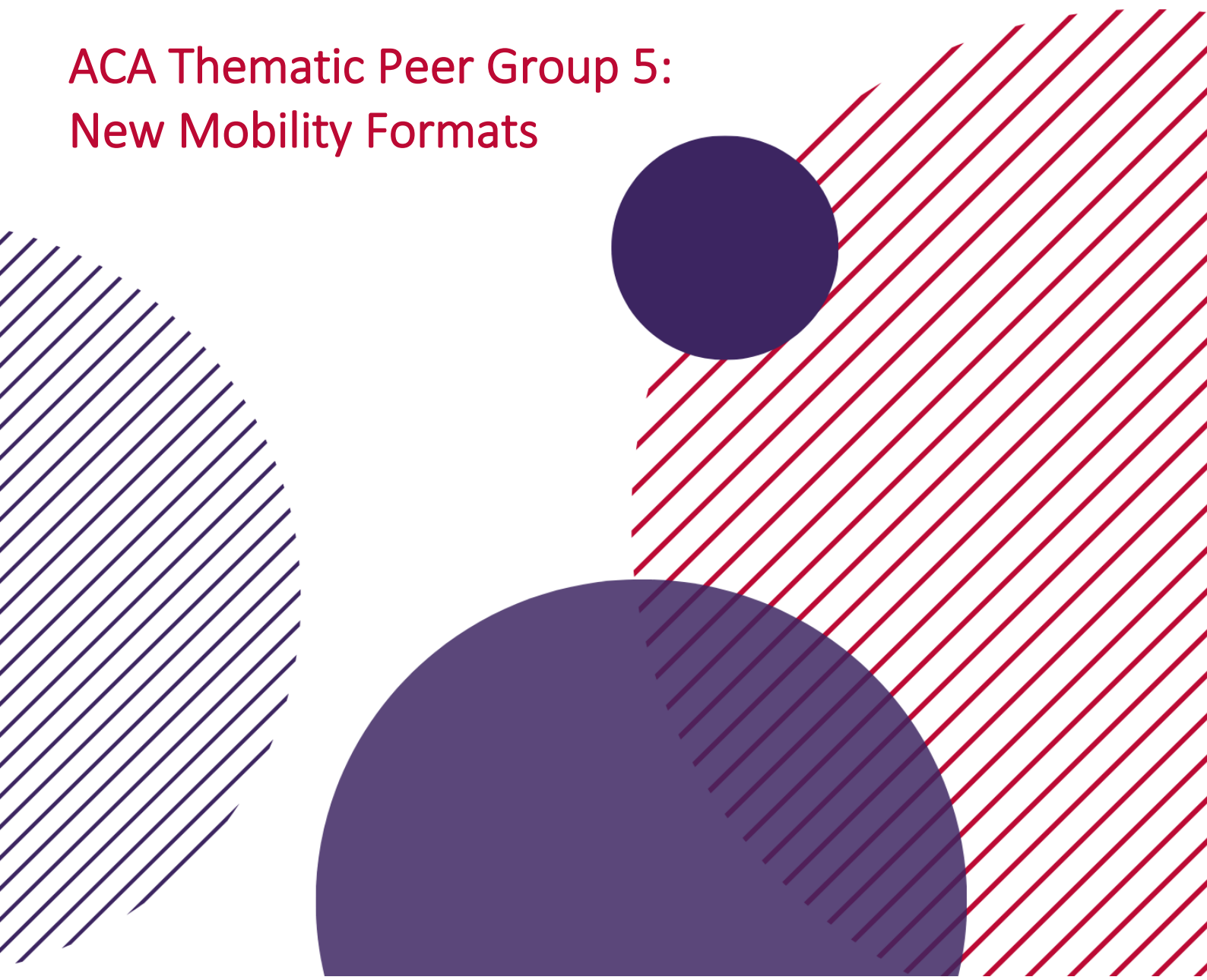




Students' motivations for Blended and Virtual International Exchanges During COVID-19

Snapshot Survey Report

ACA Thematic Peer Group 5:
New Mobility Formats





Students' motivations for Blended and Virtual International Exchanges During Covid-19 - Snapshot Survey Report

ACA Thematic Peer Group 5: New Mobility Formats

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The author and editorial team drafted this report in 2022, following reconsideration of the term 'virtual mobilities'. Even though the 2021 questionnaire conducted used the term 'virtual mobilities', this report uses 'virtual exchanges'. To read more about why the terminology has changed, please consult the following [article](#) by EAIE Vice-President and Senior Policy Advisor for Internationalisation at the University of Antwerp, Piet Van Hove.

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INTRODUCTION


1. Introduction

The Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) is a European association of national organisations that promote and fund the internationalisation of higher education. ACA members are involved in a wide range of activities, including: the delivery of student and staff mobility programmes (in most cases including the Erasmus+ Programme,) promoting and marketing their countries' higher education programmes worldwide, curriculum internationalisation, and policy advice. ACA has a dual mission. First, it serves as a platform for mutual learning and the exchange of good practice among its members, for joint projects and activities, and for advocating its members' interests to EU institutions and national governments. Second, it is a think tank that works on issues of internationalisation and innovation in higher education. In this capacity, ACA carries out research into the internationalisation of higher education, producing studies and evaluations.

ACA has created a number of Thematic Peer Groups (TPGs) as a significant way for its members to discuss specific topics in international higher education and to exchange experience and insight. New Mobility Formats was first established as a TPG in 2020, to explore the intersection between digitalisation and sustainability, discussing emerging trends and issues related to what were then seen as new mobility formats. International student and staff mobility is an essential pillar of higher education internationalisation, in which participation trends, formats, and modes are evolving continuously. Through this TPG, ACA's long-standing commitment to mobility format research is enhanced by members' country-specific expertise and networks. The group aims to synthesise and explore emerging trends in blended and virtual exchanges, and to build trust in their results.

International learning experiences with online elements are not new developments *per se*. Blended or hybrid formats (international mobility combined with an online learning component either before or after physical mobility), virtual exchanges, or more integrated formats like Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, lockdowns accelerated the need for new, digitally enhanced international experiences, and multiplied the models and arrangements applied, expanding them beyond previous ideas and practices.

The 'digital experiment' of the last two years has created many challenges for institutions, staff, and students. But it has also given new impetus to developing models originally



designed to enrich and expand the mobility experience that were used as emergency measures to continue providing education during the pandemic. In mid-2021, the New Mobility Formats TPG decided to survey students' experiences of these formats during the pandemic. Some of the main issues identified by the snapshot survey results include: infrastructure transformation, support, the ongoing quality of teaching and learning, the digital divide, intercultural considerations, and computer literacy. The study therefore helps put both the current reality, and also the future potential of these new mobility formats, into perspective.

This report is based on the data from the above-mentioned survey. The first two chapters provide background information and an overview of methodological issues, including data collection, analysis, and sample characteristics. The third chapter explores the key findings in terms of respondents' satisfaction, motivations, and the strengths and weaknesses of these new (blended and/or virtual) mobility formats. The fourth and final chapters set out the conclusions and provide recommendations for the higher education sector, building on the survey results.

2. Methodology

2.1 The study

The 2021 study by the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA), launched in the framework of its New Mobility Formats Thematic Peer Group (TPG), was designed to identify the strengths and weaknesses of new mobility formats. Research was carried out from a dual perspective, focusing on both blended (physical mobility combined with an online component) and virtual (online only) exchanges, to highlight student experiences during the pandemic. It is therefore an opportunity to reflect on the potential impact and future potential of these new mobility formats.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

The study relied on a snapshot survey conducted online in the period from 7 June to 12 July 2021. The target group comprised outgoing students enrolled in EHEA countries who had taken part in blended or virtual student exchanges in 2020 or 2021, regardless of their year of academic enrolment. The survey comprised a total of 10 questions, including two open-ended questions to gather statements about their experiences from the students. None of the questions were obligatory: respondents were able to freely skip questions. The resulting quantitative data was analysed using SPSS software and Excel, while the qualitative data submitted in answer to open questions was coded to identify and assess key trends, and the most representative statements were selected to provide contextual background. The results of this process produced the conclusions and recommendations shared in the final part of this report for the benefit of local, national, and international stakeholders.

Survey dissemination was supported by ACA members, who distributed the survey to higher education institutions, who in turn publicised it to their students who had undertaken exchanges during the pandemic. Researchers used random sampling to produce the results; respondents cannot be considered representative as the response rates from each country varied considerably, with a substantial overrepresentation of students at German HEIs. The results are therefore only representative of the survey's sample and should not be generalised. Nevertheless, they do allow us to reflect on digitally enhanced international experiences during the pandemic.

2.3 Data sample and respondent profile

In total, 1197 respondents from 35 countries across Europe took part in the survey. Most of the respondents ((301) or 25.15% of those who disclosed information about the country where they were registered before joining a virtual or blended exchange programme (n=1197)), were in Germany, while 7.18%, 6.43%, and 6.18% were in France, Austria, and the Czech Republic respectively. Georgia, Greece, Iceland, Malta, and North Macedonia were also represented but by less than 1% of the respondents.

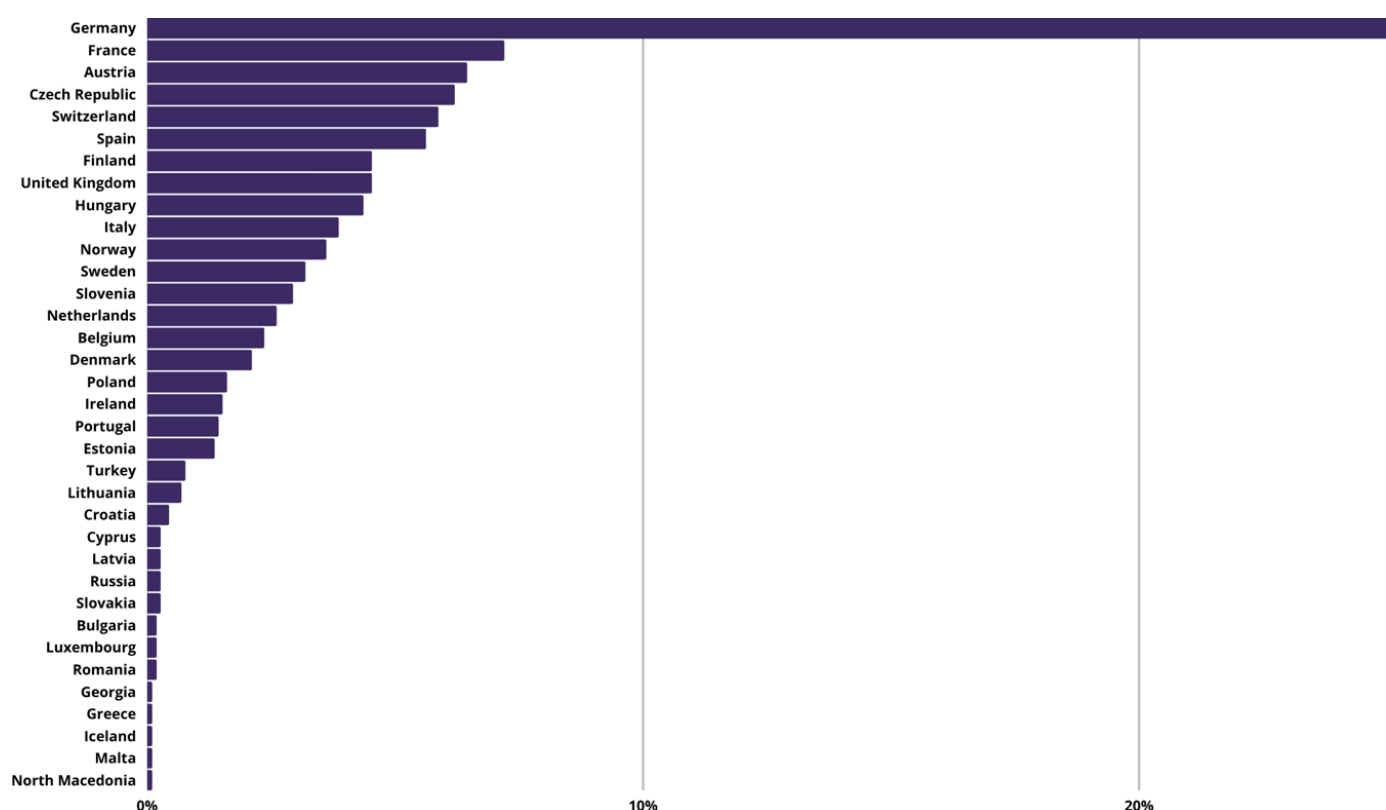


Figure 1: Which country were you registered in before joining a virtual or blended mobility programme?

In terms of the respondents' level of studies, the majority (n= 1,197) were studying for their bachelor's degree (56.98%), followed by master's degree level students (38.01%). Short and third cycle respondents were least represented at 3.26% and 1.75% respectively.

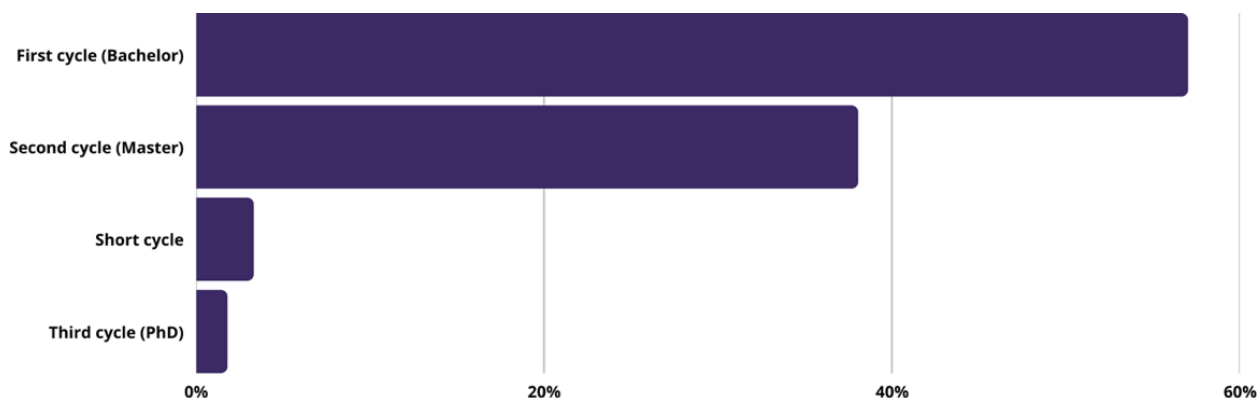


Figure 2: What level of studies were you undertaking during your mobility experience?

The survey asked respondents to select which of eight exchange programmes supported their exchange. Some 991 out of the 1,195 students who answered this question (82.93%) were involved in Erasmus +. The Swiss-European Mobility Programme (SEMP) achieved second place with 9.37% of respondents. Other mobility programs, such as the Barrande fellowship, the north2north mobility programme, and the DAAD PROMOS programme, represented less than 5% of the responses.

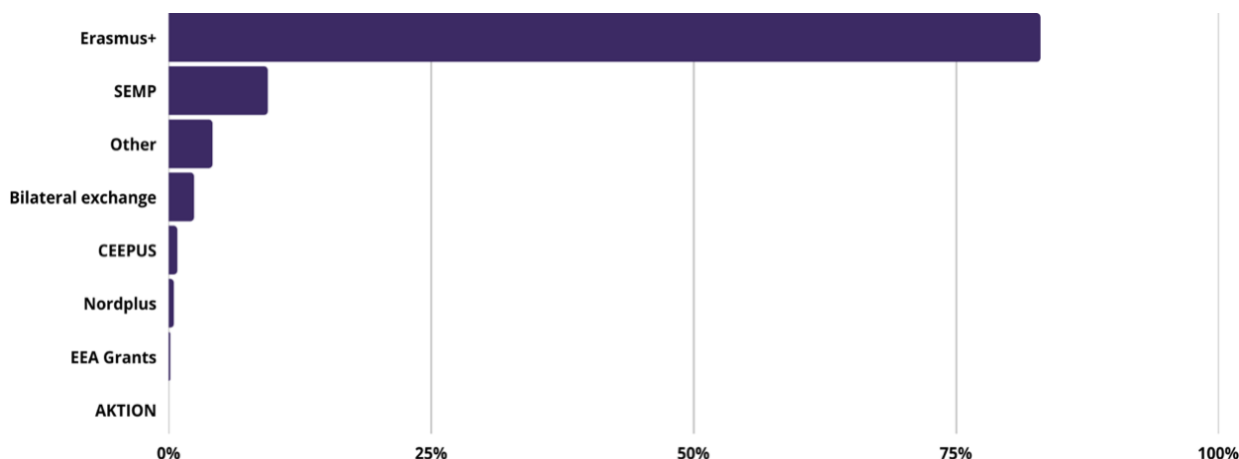


Figure 3: Which exchange programme supported your student mobility experience?

KEY FINDINGS

3. Key findings

3.1. Satisfaction

Respondents were asked about their satisfaction with blended or virtual experiences. Just over half (54.51%) of the students who answered this question (n=1,197) were **Satisfied** with their mobility experience. Just over half of that number were **Very satisfied** with their experience (30.63%). While the smallest group of respondents were **Dissatisfied** (11.85%) and **Very dissatisfied** (3.01%).

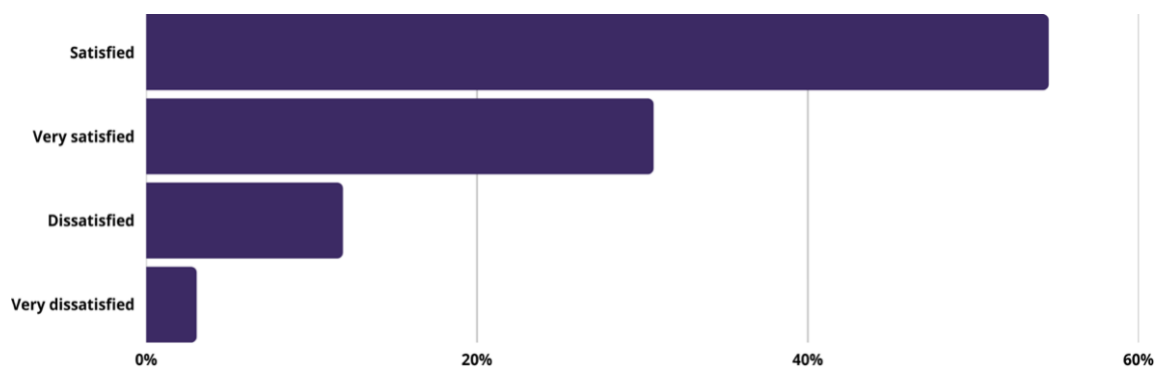
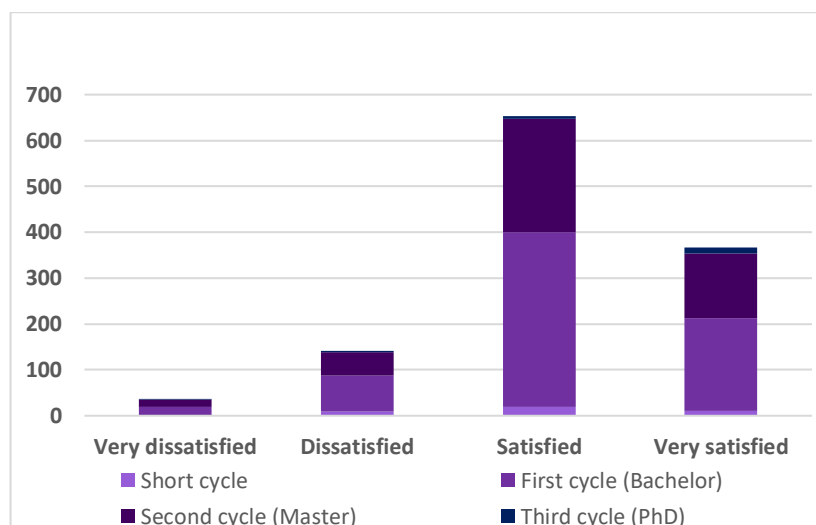


Figure 4: How satisfied were you with your blended or virtual mobility experience?

A comparison of the satisfaction results against respondents' level of studies revealed no significant differences. Similar percentages of students reported similar levels of satisfaction across all cycles.



3.2. Reasons for choosing blended and/or virtual exchanges

The survey results revealed eight different reasons for choosing blended or virtual exchange studies. Most students (n=1,170) reported selecting blended or virtual exchanges because of health-related precautions/safety, including pandemic-related restrictions (52.65%). Their second motive was the “Chance to have any international experience when physical mobility is not possible” (31.45%), followed by other reasons such as online language courses (24.27%). A minority chose these formats because of lower costs, an inability to travel (during the pandemic), family or job circumstances and stress-related reasons; representing less than 5% of the overall response rate. Some 24.27% of the respondents selected “Other” as their answer to this question, and reported factors including “to reduce the stress caused by uncertainties due to chaotic organisation and communications with universities and constantly changing restrictions,” which suggests that some HEI responses to the situation were inadequate; and ‘completing studies faster’.

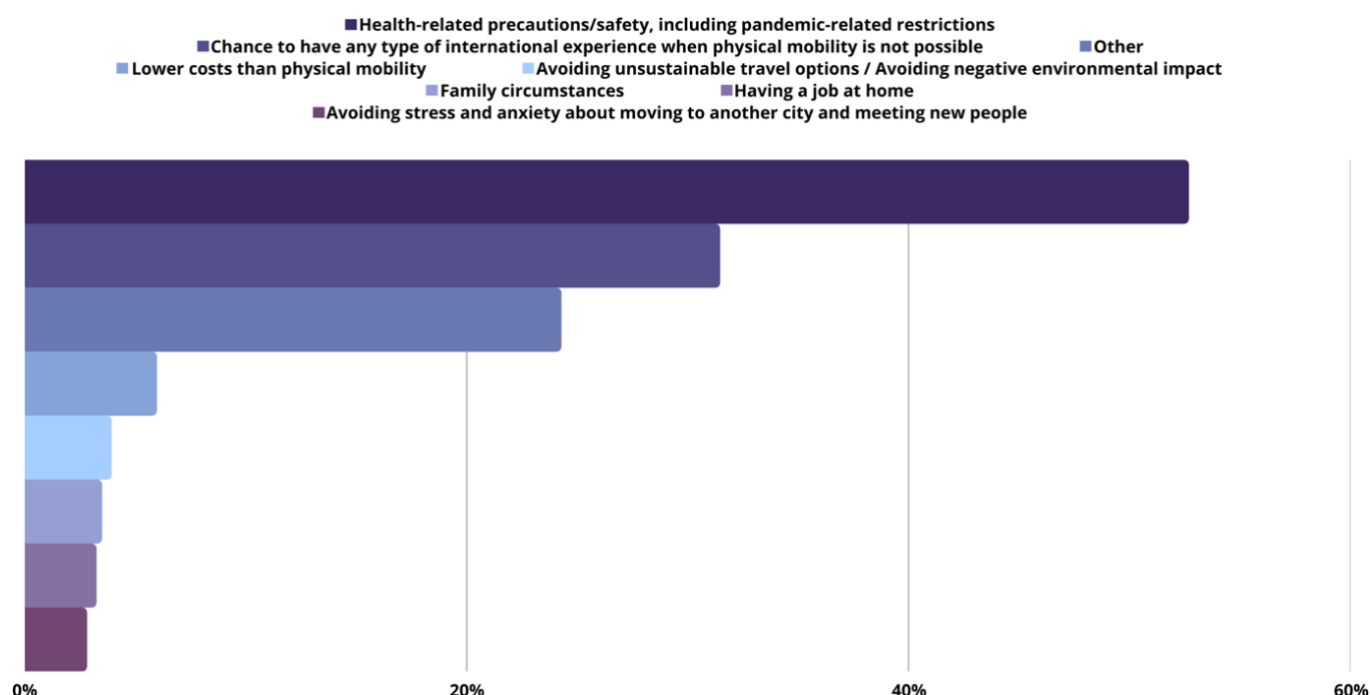


Figure 5: What was your main reason for undertaking a blended or virtual mobility experience?

3.3. Strengths and weaknesses

The survey results identified a range of strengths in digitally enhanced, blended and virtual exchanges. Given that the survey was conducted in June 2021, when there was a temporary lull in COVID-19, “Health-related or safety precautions” (46.72%) and the “Chance to have any type of international experience when physical mobility is not possible” (46.64%) emerged as the key reasons for choosing virtual or blended exchanges (n= 1,160). Since respondents were allowed to select more than one answer to this question, we can assume significant overlap between these two answers, especially given the near-identical response rate. But other enabling factors were also highlighted, such as reduced costs and increased compatibility with personal circumstances such as a permanent job or family ties (5.98%, 3.50%, and 3.25% respectively). Here, 16.90% of the respondents answered “Other” and highlighted the flexibility of such exchange formats, which make time management easier; as well as their cost-effectiveness and the ability to “virtually meet other students who wouldn’t be able to undertake an in-person exchange”. In future, health-related precautions should lose prominence as a motivating factor. It is safe to assume that most of the blended or virtual mobility students undertaking these programmes as an emergency measure will prefer physical mobility programmes when safety precautions become unnecessary. However, part-time students or students with children may retain their interest in these formats.

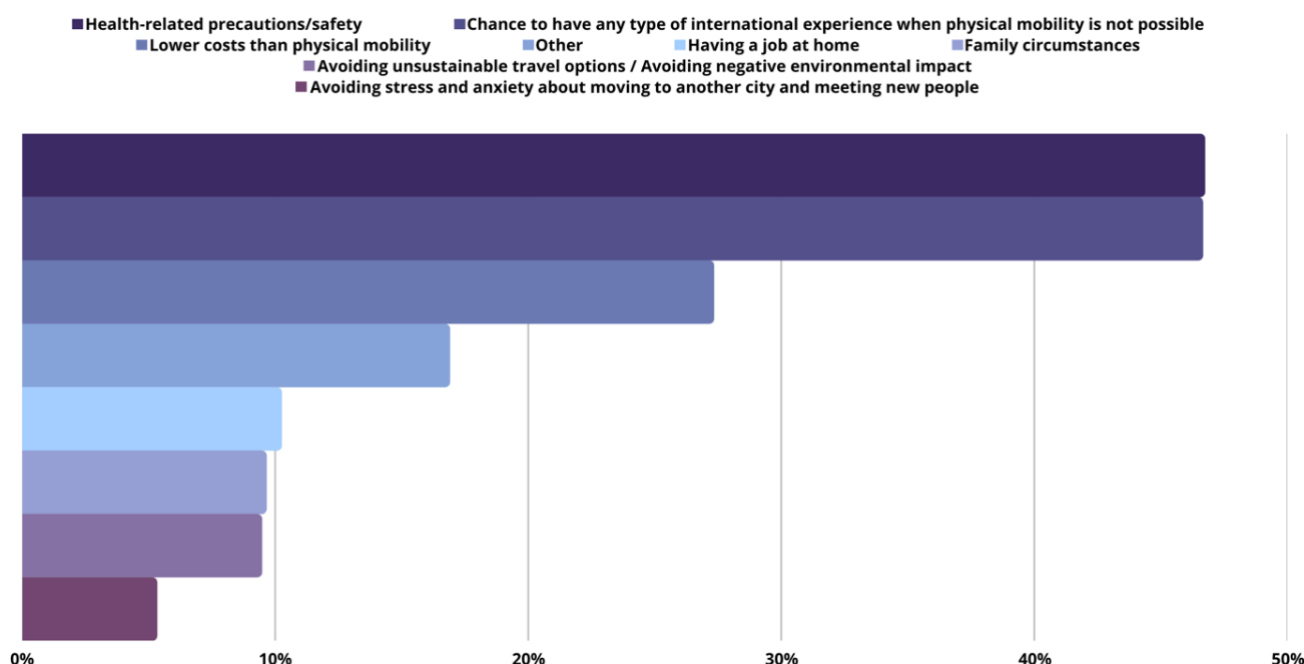


Figure 6: What were the two most important strengths of blended or virtual mobilities in your experience?

In terms of the weaknesses of blended and/or virtual exchanges, 87.91% of the respondents mentioned the lack of in-person connections, which is particularly relevant in purely online exchanges, followed by 42.01% who criticised the (inadequate) quality of teaching and learning. “Access to campus services” (25.27%) and mental health concerns (23.92%) were cited as two other weaknesses, while “Support from the administrative staff” (11.24%) and “Lack of a quiet space for learning at home” (10.74%) were significant drawbacks, but for a smaller number of students. While “Lack of proper technology for learning” and “Worries about the recognition of credits and degrees” were cited by less than 10% of the respondents. “Other” scored 6.85%, with respondents mentioning online classes lasting too long, that learning was less interactive, and that they found it hard to concentrate due to the lack of nonverbal communication (body language, etc).

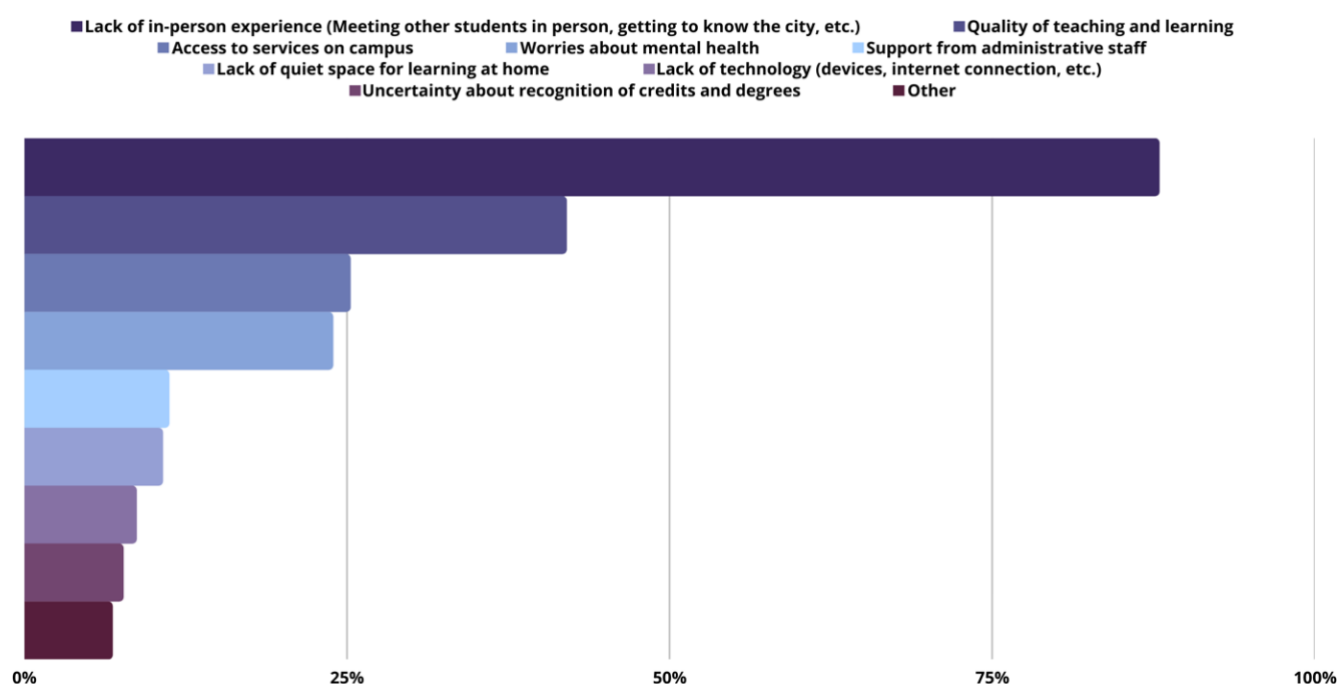



Figure 7: What do you think are the two most negative aspects of blended or virtual mobility?

3.4. Challenges and recommendations

The snapshot survey allowed respondents to describe the challenges faced during these mobility formats, and to provide feedback in the form of suggestions for improvements. Students at various institutions noted that several components of blended or virtual mobility formats needed improvement. In their view, universities need to find the right balance between on-site and online classes, to ensure enough interaction with other students.



Lack of student engagement was frequently mentioned. Respondents recommended changing the way in which lectures are organised to reduce academics' participation and increase the number of interactive exercises and opportunities for student group work. Students also faced problems caused by unstable internet connections and needed support to use university platforms and solve IT issues. Some were very dissatisfied with the poor instructions provided in class and recommended that academics should be given more training in how to conduct online lectures to improve quality. Another comment noted the need to enable more social contact, including between local students and visitors, and for online events and language courses. A small group of respondents also recommended students turn their cameras on to create a sense of community and inclusivity during online classes.


"Mobility programmes are primarily for personal growth. The past semester focused on continuing studies through online lectures, and generally ignored cultural aspects. Although maintaining studies is essential, cultural aspects also need to be facilitated."

"Blended or virtual exchanges may already be quite sophisticated on an academic level. However, the lack of in-person experience needs to be compensated for, and this did not happen in my case. Improvements should aim to create in-person experiences."

Most of the students surveyed were critical of blended or virtual exchanges. They mentioned having received little support from the international office regarding up-to-date information on border restrictions, changes, costs, regulations, and the opportunities available. Some were unhappy at losing their scholarships when studies moved online, while others lacked the motivation to take part in online courses and had to overcome stress and confusion.

"Whereas blended learning is better for students' mental health, virtual mobilities can help students take part in the Erasmus programme without having to move to a different country with stricter restrictions in force. However, Erasmus broadens your horizons through several multicultural encounters. So, improvements may be: fewer assignments, more interactive sessions, more intercultural communication and the chance to get to know the country without struggling with increased social isolation."

"Virtual mobility is no substitute for physical mobility. The full experience of such a good programme is based on face-to-face interaction and should continue. I could imagine virtual mobility as an additional programme for people who do not physically want to go abroad, perhaps for financial reasons, or more generally for people who want international interactions during their studies without going abroad for an entire semester. I think the idea of integrating virtual mobility in study programmes has a lot of potential."



Respondents also noted the need for mental health support on such programmes. Many believe blended and virtual exchanges should only be an option when it comes to travel difficulties, illness and disabilities, learning languages with speakers living in other parts of the world, and for other time-saving purposes.

“There could be new interest in blended or virtual mobility when people cannot easily move to another country, but still want to study internationally. But in my experience, a big incentive to studying abroad is getting to know another culture or country and engaging with the local and other international people. It was often impossible to meet other people due to the COVID-19 restrictions during my time abroad. It is obviously nobody’s fault, but we wanted more engagement with our fellow students. It is very hard to socialise and connect with other people in virtual lectures and seminars!”

“Universities need to seriously consider virtual education as an integrated part of the future of teaching - and not just as a temporary solution for the pandemic. We need to improve the technology available to academics and students, and make lessons interactive, even when they’re online, with the help of different tools. There’s much to be done to catch up on decades of neglecting the opportunity to move education online. The pandemic caught us unprepared. On the other hand, a big part of mobility is meeting other people and exploring the host country. I doubt anything of this nature can be properly organised in these online formats.”

Erasmus + cultural exchange was another concern mentioned by most students, since this is primarily possible when students are actually in another country. Blended mobilities are better than purely virtual exchanges for such purposes. Some respondents also believed online classes were not taken as seriously, and noted that their exams and assignments were evaluated in a rather obscure way.

“A good suggestion would be a hybrid system in which online and offline teaching is available for the same course at the same time. This way, those who are able to visit the country in person can attend course in person and other students who either can’t or don’t want to spend a semester abroad can access the same course, at the same time, with the same teachers, online.”

“Structured lectures and opportunities to meet other students online. Access to traditional campus support services, such as printers and libraries. For instance, there could be a system allowing students to send files to the university for printing and collection via a pick-up service. When you are in a rural area in another country, practical issues can be real struggles.”

However, some students were satisfied with the support received. In view of this, students recommended that universities reconsider the administrative aspects of blended or virtual exchanges, to consider additional costs such as online book purchasing, to provide clear instructions and schedules with a fixed number of classes and hours dedicated to online teaching and learning.

3.5. Interest in future blended and/or virtual exchanges

In this final question, students were asked about people's overall interest in blended and/or virtual exchanges and how this will evolve. Most (36.86%, n=1,191) believe this will tail off, while 23.09% thought that interest will increase and 22.59% that it will remain the same. Some 17.46% of respondents were too uncertain to predict future trends.

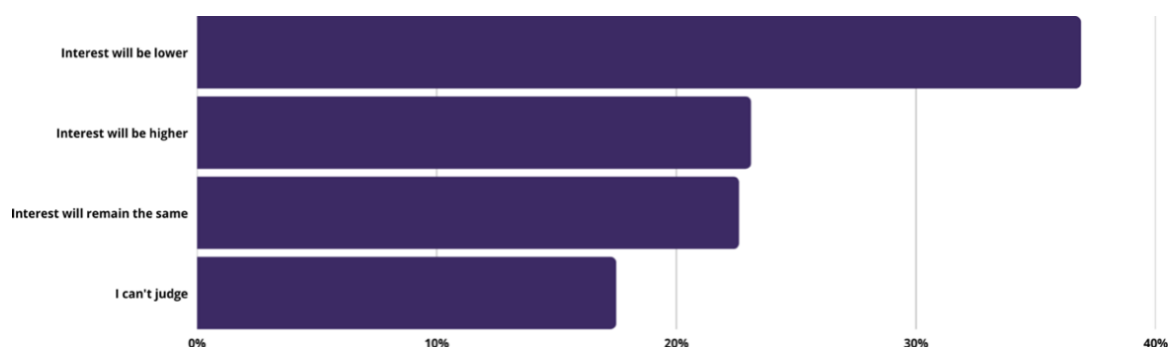


Figure 8: How do you think people's general interest in blended and/or virtual mobilities will evolve, based on your experience and that of your fellow students?

CONCLUSIONS


4. Conclusions

Across the EHEA, many higher education institutions increased their provision of virtual and hybrid exchanges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This report sheds light on some of the resulting key trends and issues to emerge from the 2020 and 2021 pandemic waves. It also provided insights into the future of these new mobility formats.

Student experiences of blended and virtual exchanges varied. They reported many technical and content challenges, and alluded to a lack of capacity to deliver such new mobility formats. Although the survey targeted students who took part in virtual and blended exchanges during the pandemic, which meant that their experiences were of *ad hoc* programmes not embedded in institutional curricula, some students were satisfied with their experience. However, a unified teaching platform across each institution would have enhanced the respondents experiences, and avoided exposing them to the different approaches followed by different academics.

The multiplication of digitally enhanced teaching and learning over the past two years also presented many quality issues and questions. How can the quality of learning and teaching be ensured? How can we guarantee that online learning outcomes are comparable to those achieved while studying in another country? There is also the issue of quality admin support, including the need to remedy the bureaucratic difficulties inherent in blended and virtual exchanges, the question of financial support for virtual exchanges, and the ability to provide support services to virtual/blended mobility students. In addition, the lack of an in-person experience and limited intercultural nature of online exchange programmes seem to have had a significant impact on mental health, with several respondents reporting this issue as one of the reasons why their experience of blended or virtual mobility was not satisfying.

Following COVID-19, the digital transformation of European higher education has received strong political backing, through several high-level EU policy and programme initiatives, such as the European Education Area; the Digital Education Action Plan (2021- 2027); the Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027); the European Universities Initiative; the European Strategy for Universities; the European Student Card Initiative and the Erasmus Without Paper project, among others.




It is, therefore, high time to address the aforementioned challenges and recognise these new mobility formats' potential to provide opportunities to people who would not otherwise have been able to go on an exchange programme. Blended and virtual exchanges should therefore develop from being an *ad hoc*, temporary solution, to becoming an integrated part of HEI internationalisation.

4.1. Brief recommendations for the sector

Based on the results of the snapshot survey, the Academic Cooperation Association has compiled the following list of brief recommendations for the European Commission, national governments, policy makers and higher education institutions.

1. ***Bottom-up approaches must receive continued support and be further enhanced through top-down policies, to ensure the delivery of high-impact blended and virtual exchanges and the uptake of digital technologies. The European Commission should continue to increase support for both blended mobilities and virtual exchanges, while national governments should recognise that technology is essential and requires investment, funding staff digital training and supporting HEI provision of technical materials and digital infrastructure.***
2. ***As quality considerations become paramount for all of the actors involved, there is a clear need to investigate and discuss what high-quality blended mobility approaches and virtual exchanges mean in practice with the higher education sector, so as to work out how to ensure quality.***
3. ***Higher education institutions also need to invest in student support services for digitally enhanced exchanges. It is very important to recognise these students' specific needs. There is a clear need to establish real connections between institutions and such students through structured approaches.***
4. ***University approaches to such digitally enhanced international higher education exchanges should prioritise meaningful and impactful social interaction. Although blended mobilities include in-person interaction, higher education institutions still need to reconsider their planning and delivery to ensure maximum results. As virtual exchanges only provide online connections, higher education institutions should strive to make these programmes as interactive and engaging as possible.***

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5. ***University associations and relevant European networks should facilitate the sharing of experiences and good practice among higher education institutions, channelling the discussions, and information about the reality on the ground to EU level, providing much-needed feedback to policy makers in order to drive good progress.***

4.2. Final remarks

While blended and virtual exchanges were a largely *ad hoc* solution to providing continuous learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, these mobility formats are expected to enable more people to take part in internationalisation practices in future. Due to the varied quality of these digitally enhanced models, many of which were created as “emergency” solutions during the COVID-19 pandemic; and in view of the lasting impact of online learning on student well-being and mental health, students currently seem to have limited interest in these types of exchange, and their motivation may decrease further, as the desire for in-person experiences rebounds. However, it is important to highlight that blended and virtual exchanges should not replace physical mobility, they should enhance internationalisation.

Blended and virtual formats are now recognised as important tools, and supported and mainstreamed via the new Erasmus+ programme (through Blended Intensive Programmes and Virtual Exchanges grants). Considering their potential benefits regarding inclusion and sustainability; and in view of the lessons learned from the pandemic, more in-depth analysis is needed to identify different perspectives in student motivations. This would allow us to clearly identify the added value of new mobility formats, by targeting students who chose these formats, rather than who were ‘forced’ into them by the pandemic, which was true in most cases during 2020 and 2021.

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SURVEY QUESTIONS

6. Survey Questions

Question 1: Which country were you registered in before joining a virtual or blended mobility programme?

Question 2: Which exchange programme supported your student mobility experience?

- ☐ First cycle (Bachelor's)
- ☐ Second cycle (Master's)
- ☐ Short cycle
- ☐ Third cycle (PhD)

Question 3: Which exchange programme supported your student mobility experience?

- ☐ Erasmus+
- ☐ Swiss-European Mobility Programme (SEMP)
- ☐ Bilateral exchange
- ☐ CEEPUS
- ☐ Nordplus
- ☐ EEA Grants
- ☐ AKTION
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Question 4: How satisfied were you with your blended or virtual mobility experience?

- ☐ Satisfied
- ☐ Very satisfied
- ☐ Dissatisfied
- ☐ Very dissatisfied

Question 5: What was your main reason for undertaking a blended or virtual mobility experience?

- ☐ Health-related precautions/safety, including pandemic-related restrictions
- ☐ Chance to have any type of international experience when physical mobility is not possible
- ☐ Lower costs than physical mobility
- ☐ Avoiding unsustainable travel options / Avoiding negative environmental impact
- ☐ Family circumstances
- ☐ Having a job at home
- ☐ Avoiding stress and anxiety about moving to another city and meeting new people

- Other (please specify)

Question 6: What were the two most important strengths of blended or virtual mobilities in your experience?

- Health-related precautions/safety
- Chance to have any type of international experience when physical mobility is not possible
- Lower costs than physical mobility
- Having a job at home
- Family circumstances
- Avoiding unsustainable travel options / Avoiding negative environmental impact
- Avoiding stress and anxiety about moving to another city and meeting new people
- Other (please specify)

Question 7: What are two most negative aspects of blended or virtual mobility in your opinion?

- Lack of in-person experience (Meeting other students in person, getting to know the city, etc.)
- Quality of teaching and learning
- Access to services on campus
- Worries about mental health
- Support from administrative staff
- Lack of quiet space for learning at home
- Lack of technology (devices, internet connection, etc.)
- Uncertainty about recognition of credits and degrees
- Other (please specify)

Question 8: What could be improved to enhance blended or virtual mobilities?

Question 9: How do you think people's general interest in blended and/or virtual mobilities will evolve, based on your experience and that of your fellow students??

- Interest will be lower
- Interest will be higher
- Interest will remain the same
- I can't judge

Question 10: Is there anything else you would like to add?