

# Erasmus+ during the COVID-19 pandemic

The experiences of Erasmus students in Poland



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# INTRODUCTION

## *Mimo wszystko*

dr Ewa Krzaklewska, study coordinator,  
Jagiellonian University in Kraków



Erasmus is already a well-established programme, which has existed under different names<sup>1</sup> for more than 30 years in the European Union and beyond. Since 2014 the student exchange between universities has functioned under the European Union programme for education, training, youth and sport – Erasmus+. Under its auspices, in the years preceding the pandemic, about 250,000 students spent a semester or two of their studies in a foreign university annually. The aim of the report is to take stock of this unique year of the programme – the year in which the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the plans of students as well as of programme institutions. With all the mobility restrictions or barriers, its impact was most of all directly visible in the radically dropping numbers of those who studied as Erasmus students, also in Poland. Erasmus students experienced lockdowns, border closures, sanitary restrictions, or the obligation to wear masks – sometimes stricter than in their home country, sometimes looser, so the Erasmus+ Programme could have been seen as the escape from curfews or similar.

The effects of the COVID-19 crisis on Erasmus+ are multifold. Quite clearly, the affected group at the center are the students who were planning to spend a semester or a year of their studies in a different country. Therefore, this study looks into the experience of Erasmus students, who no matter the pandemic conditions decided to take part in exchange and studied in Poland in the academic year 2020/2021. We not only include their views, but also reflect on the educational experience of this group together with those on the receiving end – the academic teachers. The overarching research question is the following: What was the mobility experience of the Erasmus students during the COVID-19 pandemic? What were the drivers for students to travel abroad in the harshened epidemiological conditions? Is mobility in pandemic – by no doubts constrained and challenging – better than no mobility? In addition, the study also sheds light on answers geared towards the future: What would be the impact of the epidemiological crisis on organisation of the Erasmus+ Programme? Would it lead to substituting physical mobility with a virtual one? Would attitudes of students towards educational mobility transform?

The Erasmus+ Programme allows higher education students all around the continent to take a chance of spending a period of their education in a foreign country. In the last years, academic mobility has become engrained into educational systems and students continued to lay high hopes in mobility experience for enhancing their educational experience, intercultural learning, and ultimately, also professional career prospects. The mobility dream

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<sup>1</sup> In the report, we use the generic term “Erasmus students” in relation to those who participated in the Erasmus+ Programme, similarly to “Erasmus stay” or “Erasmus study”. We use term Erasmus+ when referring directly to the programme.

shapes, sometimes with a false promise, young people's perception of education, future job, personal relations (Cairns 2014). But a foreign exchange is actually not just a dream, as it becomes an important life event for many young people – a rite of passage or a turning point, which later might be a gateway for independent living, migration, work in a given sector of the labour market or an impulse for further educational plans (Krzaklewska 2013; Frändberg 2014; European Commission 2019). The personal aspect of mobility experience cannot be undervalued either, since students indicate its benefits for personal growth, new social contacts, becoming more open-minded and tolerant, or striving for cosmopolitan life style (Krzaklewska 2013; Beech 2019; Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska 2021).

The study is unique as it follows up the wave of interest from the stakeholders in relation to adaptation of the Erasmus students in the midst of the pandemic outburst in March 2020. Immediately in that period, a series of studies was run by organisations and institutions, trying to see how Erasmus students manage in those new conditions and what support of institutions is needed to assist them in crisis situations (for overview of studies see Krzaklewska and Şenyuva 2020). This second cohort of Erasmus students who studied in the academic year of 2020/2021 must be analysed in separation from those who were hit by lockdown in March 2020 in a foreign country, with about half of them ultimately coming back to their home countries and continuing through online education. The students that we talked to and who filled in the survey questionnaire are students who took a decision to come to Poland as Erasmus students, whilst mostly having in mind the pandemic conditions. While they still had to face many uncertainties in relation to epidemiological conditions, they knew that their stay abroad would differ from a typical socially-intense experience of living in a foreign country. We may say that they decided to go abroad – as we say in Polish *mimo wszystko* – against all odds, being aware of restrictions and sometimes accompanied by fears.

In our study we take an additional look at mobility from the perspective of the academic teachers. We decided to talk with teachers and lecturers also due to the particular change that occurred in learning – the shift of educational experience towards becoming almost fully online. The academic teachers thus constitute an additional source of knowledge about Erasmus during the pandemic, mostly in relation to a question of the possibility to move (or lack thereof) Erasmus to an online form. Is virtual Erasmus good enough? How can we enhance intercultural learning online? What are the new methods of learning in virtual exchanges?

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that we have seen in relation to learning mobility was multidimensional – not only disallowing it in practical sense, but also questioning the meaning of mobility (or its necessity) altogether, specifically in light of online education (Krzaklewska and Şenyuva 2020). Even if introduced well and fast, appearing efficient or at least sufficient, online education – or distance learning – creates new challenges in relation to quality of instruction, well-being of students and teachers, and even functioning of university as a community. The recent debate – resulting from the virus' spread – asks about the very foundations of academic mobility; it highlights the inequality embedded in the previous, institutional setup of foreign student exchanges and internationalisation, while noting the neoliberal pressures towards individualised success that is potentially to be acquired through mobility (Cairns et al 2021). It also points out the institutional responsibility for international students, in relation to their safety, legal status and available support in crisis (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020).

We hope that this report will not only be an au courant account of this particular year of Erasmus programme history, but that it will constitute a basis for reflection on better Erasmus in the years to come. The idea is that it will support students in their educational pathways and growing up no matter the circumstances, *mimo wszystko*.

# Summary of main results



The data comprises 960 responses to online survey (response rate 25%) and 5 focus group interviews with 28 Erasmus students who studied in Poland in 2020/2021, as well as 12 Individual in-depth Interviews (IDI) of Polish academic teachers of the Erasmus students.

**Maintained value of mobility:** Even if it diminished in terms of absolute numbers, the positive image of mobility and its significance even in harshened conditions of crisis cannot be denied. Students want to explore educational opportunities abroad and get new experiences in their youth, even if these are marked by some limitations or restrictions. Future mobility prospects still flourish and most students consider prospective mobility as part of their biographic plans. It is unclear if mobility would become a less popular or less appreciated life-choice – potentially among certain groups.

**Opening towards virtual mobility:** The report includes limited evidence on the openness and evaluation of virtual learning as something to be equated with physical mobility. The stay abroad is seen as a critical element of the experience, and the numbers of those studying virtually were low. The majority of teachers agree that virtual mobility is better than no mobility at all, and should not be treated as a substitute, but as an emergency solution for a given period of time. Positive voices were rare, but should be taken into account considering the potentially inclusive character of such solutions in the future. The teachers recognise the application of the so-called blended mobility in situations which pose logistical challenges to teachers and students, as well as depending on the form of teaching. In sum, virtual Erasmus could be maintained as an add-on alternative to the most desired physical mobility.

**The social aspect of the Erasmus:** This dimension was certainly lackluster in the narratives and survey responses. Students' expectations, though, were not high in this regard. They were aware of the pandemic and tried to navigate it, usually following the restrictions. Negative impact of the missing social life could be observed in relation to psychological well-being, educational aspects, language acquisition and intercultural learning. When the pandemic does not allow for conducting social events, online activities such as discussions, small talk, group work and other means of meeting people should be considered and introduced.

**Education online abroad:** With limited opportunities within social life, the academic dimension of stay abroad became more pronounced than in the previous years. Experience of different learning environments was indicated as one of the most valuable outcomes of exchange. The respondents in the focus group were paying a lot of attention to the educational aspect of the Erasmus and reflected on the meaning of this particular semester/year on their broader

learning pathway. It is not to say that this dimension was insignificant for students in previous Erasmus editions, but rather that this sphere of life has become a central dimension of their experience in the situation of limited social and cultural explorations. Also, virtual learning schedules offered a structure of the participants' days in uncertain pandemic conditions, and outcomes were strongly related to this dimension. Students were in general happy about provided online learning, professors engagement and quality of courses, even if shortcomings were pointed out in relation to passive methodologies, technological challenges or communication problems.

**Intercultural learning:** The cultural aspects of the stay were evaluated positively, with students having opportunity to meet their peers from other countries or cultures and learn something about their destination country, mostly through country-limited travelling. Students' accounts relate mostly to language competence – with many still being happy with their English language practice. Some teachers tried to stimulate intercultural contact between students during the courses by using suitable methods of work (group work, discussions) and tailored “cultural” course content. Nonetheless, the deeper analysis shows that intercultural learning was rather limited. The convivial aspect, albeit limited by the COVID-19 pandemic and national bubbles, was an important dimension of their stays. The contact with the locals was actually relatively frequent, potentially due to the dormitory-based sociability. Thus, a dormitory “mix” (not reserving particular house just for international students) could be considered to strengthen the contact with local, Polish students.

**Support and safety:** This aspect was important from the perspective of students travelling under epidemiological conditions. The perceived challenges and worries were frequently linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the study indicates the importance of support structures from the university – both formal and informal (e.g. student organisations or individual mentors), also in relation to mental health – here, students had less information on possible support. In other areas, the support of universities was evaluated quite highly.

**Poland as an Erasmus destination:** Poland was for most of the students the first choice country, but even those who did not originally plan to go to Poland could achieve a given level of satisfaction – which proves that, if well promoted, Poland can potentially become much more popular with the Erasmus students than it is now. So the slogan “Let Poland surprise you” conveys this message well. Some negative aspects deter students from coming to Poland. These include: a fear of hostile behaviour towards foreigners, in particular towards people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds; problems with communicating

with locals who may not speak English; shortcomings in the institutional support from the university, also in context of health care.

**Positive image of Polish cities and universities:** The students hold positive views of particular cities and universities in Poland (mostly large cities and metropolises); in fact, the crucial criterion for selecting a university is the city where it is located. These opinions are often strengthened by the recommendations from students who previously had visited Poland or studied there. The promotion of Poland as a destination country should refer to positive features of cities, next to prestige and quality of selected universities. Also, the size of the city where higher education institution was located significantly differentiated many aspects of Erasmus experience, students' satisfaction, social contacts or outcomes of exchange.

**Uncertain outcomes:** Students consider their Erasmus stay as a part of the wider project of gaining life experience. Because of that, mobility needs to be seen as an indispensable component of their educational pathways and envisioned careers. The outcomes they pointed out related mostly to intercultural learning, while those connected to social aspects were clearly less pronounced. There was more uncertainty in terms of the professional outcomes: students were mostly of the opinion that the exchange offered few prospects to advance one's professional career, both at home and abroad. The stay in Poland, in some instances, had a liberating dimension, particularly for those who actually moved away from their places of origins and parental homes. However, this year's Erasmus students were not in a position to fully detach themselves from their homes and countries due to constant worries about the pandemic situation. The notions of perseverance, self-efficacy and managing in difficult conditions were voiced, as students felt that having these experiences in difficult conditions is a sign of their personal strength, responsibility over one's life and increasing autonomy. The pandemic made the experience a better fit for MA and PhD students, rather than for BA students, since the latter group is more interested in personal connections and the cultural aspects of their stay. The debate on European identity is absent as it has been overshadowed by current reflections and worries around safety, well-being, as well as social isolation of students.

**The situation of non-EU students:** It should be noted that non-EU students were very eager to participate in the study. They potentially faced more difficulties, as their stay abroad was evaluated more negatively. The COVID-19 pandemic created more obstacles for travel, so the visits from friends were disallowed/difficult. Furthermore, it seems that non-EU Erasmus participants faced more pronounced administrative challenges in regard to visa procedures.

**Erasmus students attitudes:** Students are clearly members of Erasmus generation believing in importance of mobility for young people, seeing it as a freedom that should not be limited by pandemic. Clearly, they strive to ensure that the pandemic does not constrain their long term plans, while being aware of their limited capacity to change current conditions. Erasmus students declare a rather high sense of self-efficacy and indicate being able to face difficult situations and find solutions, if enough necessary effort is put into it. More long-term oriented strategising was indicated to be less of their feature. Most of the students were not too much afraid of COVID-19, with some anxiety declared particularly in relation to media coverage of the pandemic.

**Erasmus teachers experience during the pandemic:** Interviewed teachers reported an increased workload and pressure during the pandemic. It can be explained by the need to gain new competences, preparing new teaching materials, communication with students, and additional time spent preparing classes. The lack of interaction between the teacher and the students, and among students, decreased the quality of the classes and student motivation and engagement. Moreover, many teachers took on an extra role of mentors, providing part-time psychological support and taking care of the students' matters in Poland.



# BACKGROUND

## Statistics on Erasmus students in Poland

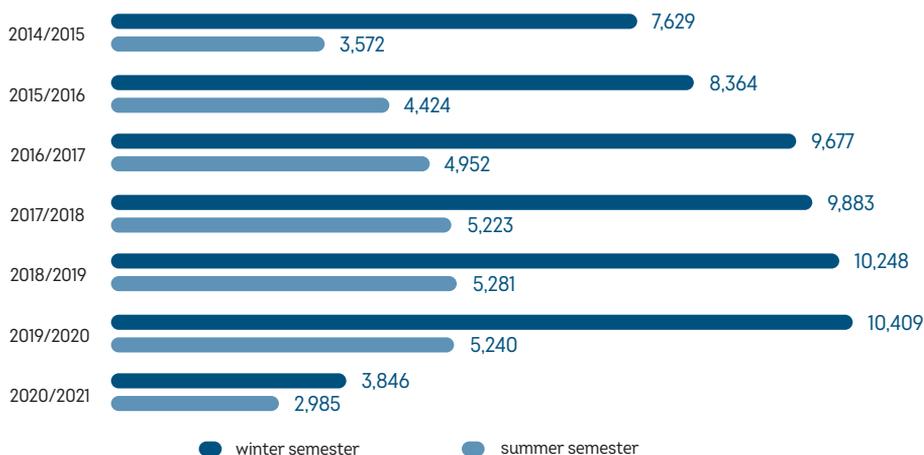


According to the statistical data from the Polish National Agency of the Erasmus+ Programme (Fila, Rybińska and Sot 2021), Poland between pre-pandemic years of 2014–2020 was the sixth most popular destination country for Erasmus students, after Spain, France, Germany, Italy and the UK. Arrivals to Poland constituted 6% of all students (almost 87,000) in those years. Students arriving in Poland came from 115 countries – both Programme and Partner countries<sup>2</sup> – from every diverse corner of the world. Students from Partner countries constituted almost 4% of all the Erasmus students in Poland. As we will see they were very active in our study, eager to share their experience.

The pandemic crisis had a critical impact on number of incoming students to Poland only in the year 2020/2021. In the previous academic year 2019/2020, students have arrived in Poland for the second semester in February 2020, just before the outburst of the pandemic. In previous years, there were usually 10,000 students coming to Poland for the first semester and 5,000 for the second semester. In the year 2020/2021, there were 3,846 students registered in the first semester and 2,985 in the second semester. Thus, the numbers dropped significantly from about 15,000 to about 7,000.



**Figure 1.**  
The number of registered participants of Erasmus+ mobility studying at Polish universities in the years 2014–2021



Source: Fila, Rybińska and Sot 2021.

<sup>2</sup> The Programme countries consist of EU Member States, members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) which are members of the European Economic Area (EEA): Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein; acceding countries, candidate countries and potential candidates: Republic of North Macedonia, Republic of Turkey and Republic of Serbia. The Partner countries can take part in certain Actions of the Erasmus+ Programme, subject to specific criteria or conditions and include, among others, Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership countries, South-Mediterranean countries, Russian Federation, Asia, Central Asia, Latin America, African, Caribbean and Pacific States, industrialised countries. For the list see the *Programme Guide*. [ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/part-a\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/programme-guide/part-a_en) [accessed on: 18 July 2021].

More precisely, the drop in the winter semester of 2020/2021 was of 63% in comparison to the previous year, while in the summer semester it was 43%. We can see that the postponement of mobility to the second semester, driven by hopes of pandemic mitigation, has resulted in an unusual trend of equal numbers of students in both semesters. It is important to say that students generally choose to come to the first semester as it gives them possibility to extend their stay towards the second semester.

Usually, the two most popular sending countries to Poland are Turkey and Spain, but there are many incoming students also from other countries such as Italy, France, Portugal and Germany. The pandemic had an effect on arrival of Turkish students as well, the main sending country towards Poland, with numbers decreasing in the winter semester, but increasing in the summer. An upswing in the number of arrivals of Italian students has also been observed – potentially tired of pandemic restrictions in their home country.



# Study methodology



The study consisted of online survey and focus group interviews directed towards Erasmus students studying in Poland in the year 2020/2021, as well as the individual in-depth interviews with academic teachers who conduct courses for Erasmus students. Table 1 shows the COVID-19 pandemic timeline compared with the schedule of the research - with interviews and survey being conducted still under harsh restrictions and dramatic consequences of the third wave of pandemic in Poland, while the focus group interviews were administered in the time of the decreasing number of infections, loosening of restrictions, ongoing vaccinations, and improved weather conditions - all giving hope for the brighter future and strongly impacting students' mood.



**Table 1.**  
The COVID-19 in Poland timeline vs. research timeline

Pandemic in Poland timeline	Research timeline
<p>March 2020: outburst of COVID-19 pandemic 20 March 2020: lockdown introduced in Poland</p>	
<p>September 2020: hopes for hybrid learning at universities</p>	<p>November 2020: idea of the study</p>
<p>September/October 2020: Erasmus students arrive in Poland</p>	<p>January-February 2021: preparation of the research tools</p>
<p>Mid October 2020: second wave of pandemic in Poland, new restrictions</p>	<p>February 2021: interviews with teachers (Individual in-depth Interviews - IDI)</p>
<p>February 2021: new semester students arrive</p>	<p>End of March/April 2021: Computer-Assisted Web Interview (CAWI) survey</p>
<p>March 2021: third wave of pandemic</p>	<p>April-May 2021: online focus group interviews</p>
<p>May 2021: loosening restrictions 15 May 2021: no masks in the public spaces</p>	<p>June 2021: final report</p>
<p>June 2021: end of summer semester</p>	

Source: own work.

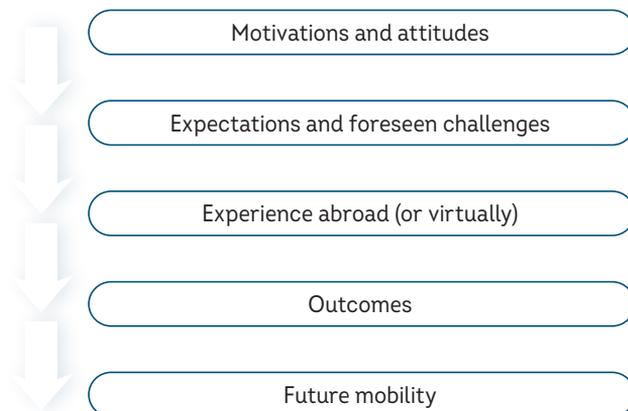
## Research aims

The research focused on the following areas (Figure 2):

- 1. Motivations for studying abroad:** Analysing the students' motivations for participation in the Erasmus+ Programme, with a particular focus on pandemic circumstances as an intervening condition modifying students decisions.
  - Why did the students choose Poland, or a given city, as a destination?
  - Did students decide to study online or come to Poland?
  - What were students' expectations towards the stay?
  - Did students worry about potential challenges of studying in a foreign country, in particular in the midst of an epidemiological crisis?
  
- 2. Experience abroad:** Highlighting the most important aspects of the students' stay abroad.
  - How did students experience studying online? What is the perspective of the academic teachers on online education of Erasmus students?
  - What are the ways to create networks and socialise with other students during the stay abroad at the time of the pandemic?
  - How did students experience intercultural learning during the pandemic?
  - How is the support of the home institutions evaluated?
  
- 3. Virtual Erasmus:** Exploring the potential of virtual Erasmus for international student exchange.
  - Can virtual mobility in Erasmus+ fulfill its objectives?
  - Is the intercultural learning possible through online education?
  - Can social networks be forged through virtual Erasmus?
  
- 4. Visions of future mobility:** Reflecting on impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mobility in education, professional and personal trajectories of students.
  - How did the pandemic impact the perceived value of mobility in terms of education and professional career?
  - Would students recommend mobility regardless of the epidemic conditions?
  - What is students' vision of future mobilities?



**Figure 2.**  
Thematic areas of the study



*Source: own work.*

## Survey study with Erasmus students

The survey questionnaire was available online since 25 March to 30 April 2021. The invitation to participation in the survey was sent to students through international offices at their universities upon the request from the National Agency of the Erasmus+ Programme in Poland (FRSE).

The survey sample consists of **960 respondents** – Erasmus students who studied in Poland in the winter semester of academic year 2020/2021. We received 1,024 answers to the survey, but eventually the sample included 960 questionnaires of those participants who have answered to at least two parts of the survey. Among those, 930 students filled in the whole questionnaire. As the survey was directed to students from the winter semester (3,846 students), the **response rate was 25%**. In comparison to other online studies, this is a relatively high level of participation, which may indicate a vivid interest of students to share their experiences. We shall stress that students eagerly replied to an open question included in the questionnaire, with extensive replies, which is an additional indicator of such interest.

The sample appears quite representative also in relation to the participants' country of origin – six most popular origin countries in the survey mirror six most popular countries according to the reported statistical data on Erasmus participation. Nonetheless, the Partner countries' students participation was relatively more frequent: their responses in the survey constituted 12% of all the responses (as compared to their 4% participation in the overall number of students coming to Poland).

The survey questionnaire was designed by the survey team, using and drawing inspiration from other studies on Erasmus (Krzaklewska and Krupnik 2006; Krupnik and Krzaklewska 2006; Lesjak et al. 2015; Aresi et al. 2018; European Commission 2019; European Commission 2020; Educations.com 2020). We used two scales for measuring attitudes of students – self-efficacy scale (Bandura 1977; Bandura 1997) and the fear of COVID-19 scale (Ahorsu et al. 2020).

## Focus group interviews with Erasmus students

Five focus group interviews were organised at the end of April and in May 2021. They gathered students visiting six universities in Poland: Jagiellonian University in Kraków (6 students), University of Łódź (5 students), UMCS – Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin (4 students), Poznań University of Economics and Business (4 students), Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and University of Zielona Góra (joint discussion of 9 students). Altogether, they included 28 participants in total.

Focus groups lasted from 1,5-2 hours, and were conducted in English. They were held online, which impacted their dynamics as the moderator had to be more proactive in structuring the discussion, encouraging people to talk and giving voice to volunteers. The general observation is that the online form allows the discussion between the participants to evolve to a lesser extent than focus groups in person. Smaller number of participants proved to be beneficial in allowing each of them to have their space online, but on the other hand larger groups allowed for more diversified accounts. Finally, the recruitment to focus groups proved to be challenging as online communication has probably become tedious. The drop out resulted mostly from the collision with other duties, including COVID-19 vaccinations. In general though, the students were eager to share their experiences and reported positive evaluation of the overall discussion. In few cases, some challenges regarding communication were present, due to English language skills or technical issues.

When it comes to the characteristics of the sample, the focus group participants' average age was about 22, but it ranged from 19 to 27. 18 female and 10 male students participated in the discussions. Most students arrived in Poland for their Erasmus semester, but two students studied online. Students came from diverse European (16) and non-European countries (12). Programme countries were represented by students from Turkey, Spain, Romania, France, Germany, Latvia. Partner countries were represented by students from China, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Morocco and Russia.

Students studied at different levels, PhD included. They came from an array of faculties, but with good representation of students from economics and business, psychology, political sciences and physics, but also from mathematics and computer science, geology, law, history, sociology and English studies.

## Interviews with Polish academic teachers

The study with academic teachers was qualitative in nature. Twelve individual in-depth interviews were conducted online, with university teachers who teach classes for Erasmus+ Programme students. Experience of teaching Erasmus students for at least one semester overlapping with during the pandemic (2019/2020 summer semester, and 2020/2021 winter or summer semester) was a recruitment criterion.

12 teachers were recruited to the study – 4 from each of the three different university centers: University of Łódź, Poznań University of Economics and Business, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. This sample comprised universities of different sizes and with different numbers of Erasmus students- large, middle-size and small. The respondents mainly represent social sciences and humanities, business studies, but also law and chemistry. The Table 2 lists key data about the respondents.

**Table 2.**  
List of respondents

Code of the interview	Code used in the report	University	Scientific discipline
LDZ01	R1	University of Łódź	Sociology
LDZ02	R2	University of Łódź	Law
LDZ03	R3	University of Łódź	Economics
LDZ04	R4	University of Łódź	International political studies
POZ01	R5	Poznań University of Economics and Business	Management and quality sciences
POZ02	R6	Poznań University of Economics and Business	Management and quality sciences
POZ03	R7	Poznań University of Economics and Business	Management and quality sciences
POZ04	R8	Poznań University of Economics and Business	European studies
LU01	R9	Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin	Philosophy
LU02	R10	Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin	Chemistry
LU03	R11	Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin	Hispanic studies
LU04	R12	Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin	Economics

*Source: own work.*



# RESULTS

Part I: Experiences of Erasmus students in Poland in the COVID-19 pandemic

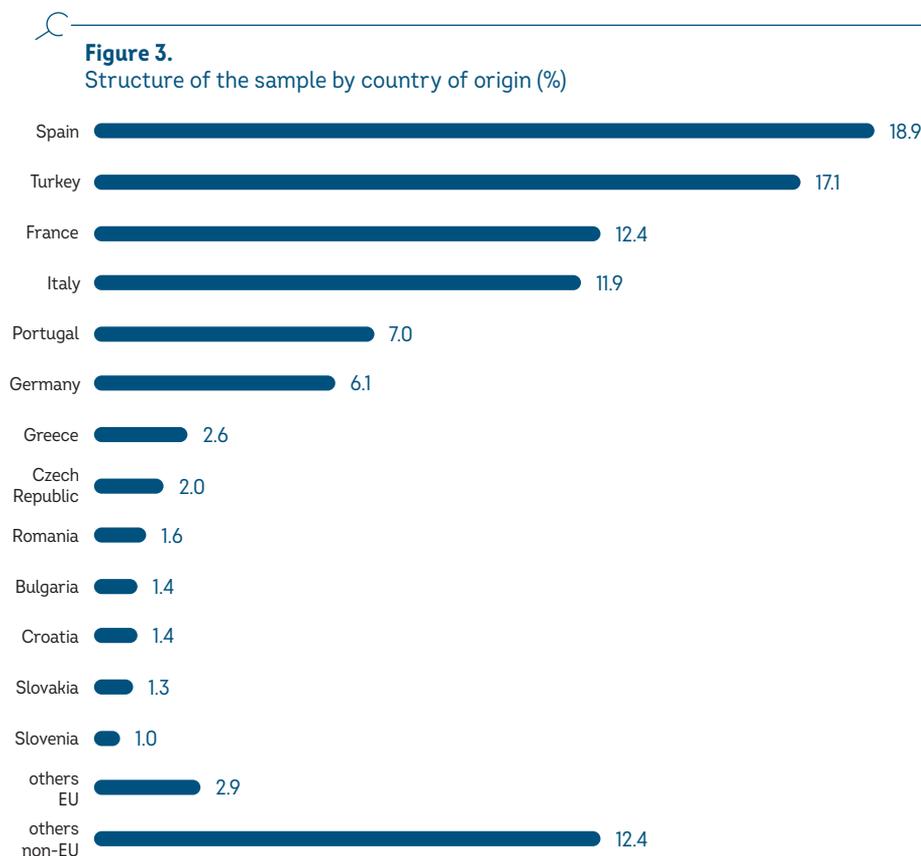


In this central part of the report, we will look at the Erasmus+ Programme from the students' perspective – the presented results are based on both results from the survey and focus group interviews.

## Who are Erasmus students in Poland? Characteristics of survey respondents

### Socio-demographic information

Slightly over 70% respondents came from EU countries. Most of them came from Spain, France, Italy, Portugal and Germany. The remaining group came from countries not belonging to the EU. Most of them came from Turkey (just over 17% of all respondents), but in general they represented diverse countries (i.e. Ukraine, Russian Federation, Indonesia, Nigeria, Moldova, India, Armenia, Belarus, Brazil, China) – (Figure 3).



Source: own work.

Among the respondents, there were 413 male students (43%), 539 female students (56%), 2 non-binary students and 6 who preferred not answer this question. About half of the respondents were under 22 years old, almost every third was in the age category between 23–24 years, and every fifth was over 25 years old (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.**  
Structure of the sample by age



*Source: own work.*

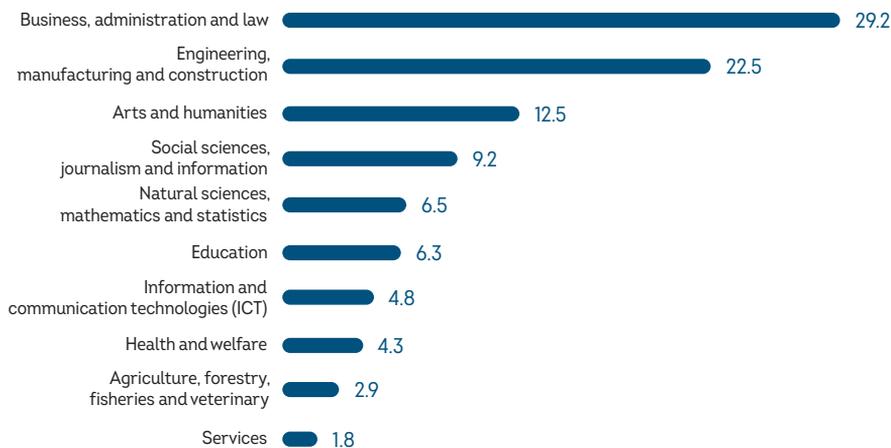
### Educational characteristics

Among the surveyed students, the greatest number were students in first-cycle studies (Bachelor's studies) – 75%. Every fourth respondent (25%) was a second-cycle student (Master's studies) and only 5 people were on doctoral studies. Due to the small number of doctoral students, in further analysis we look at doctoral students together with MA students.

The most popular field of study among respondents was business, administration and law – almost one-third of the respondents are students of these faculties. The other large group of students represented engineering, manufacturing and construction – slightly over every fifth respondent chose such studies. Another considerable sample were students of arts and humanities (12.5%) or of social sciences, journalism and information (9.2%). The smallest groups of respondents (less than 5%) studied in the fields of ICT, health and welfare, agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary, as well as services (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.**  
Structure of the sample by field of study (%)



*Source: own work.*

## Social background

The answers to the questions about the place of origin of the respondents show that 37% of students came from large agglomerations or large cities. Almost half of them came from medium or small towns, and about 15% from villages and rural areas (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.**  
Structure of the sample by place of residence



*Source: own work.*

The respondents were asked about the education level of their parents, which is generally treated in sociological research as one of the indicators of the cultural capital of the family of origin. Slightly over 40% of students indicated that none of their parents has a university education. Among the respondents, almost one-third answered that both parents had higher education. Slightly more respondents indicated that their fathers had higher education (17%) than that of their mothers (15.5%) – (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.**

Structure of the sample by parents' education



Source: own work.

When it comes to the economic condition of the students' households, 52% of the respondents came from well-off homes, describing the economic situation as very good. They indicated that their family could afford to meet all their needs and save money. Slightly over 40% of the students described the economic situation of their family as good and indicated that they could satisfy most of their needs, but had no savings. Only slightly more than 6% of the students described their economic situation as poor – their family being able to meet basic needs. The last category concerns students from very poor households, who barely satisfy their basic needs. There were 7 students in this situation. Overall, it can be said that most Erasmus+ students came from families that do not have major economic problems (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.**

Economic condition of students' household



Source: own work.

## Characteristics of the Erasmus stay

### Erasmus cities

The experience of studies depends on the type of city where the university is located. The answers were collected from respondents studying in various academic centres, both in large, medium and smaller cities. Three types of study places were distinguished:

- metropolises (Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań and Wrocław),
- university cities (Białystok, Gdańsk, Katowice, Lublin, Łódź, Zielona Góra, Toruń, Bydgoszcz, Rzeszów, Opole, Olsztyn),
- province cities with State Higher Vocational Schools (Elbląg, Kalisz, Kielce, Koszalin, Krosno, Legnica, Lubin, Nysa, Siedlce, Sopot, Sosnowiec).

Among 960 respondents, almost 60% studied in metropolises, slightly more than one-third in large university cities, and 7% in provincial cities (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.**  
Place of study



Source: own work.

### Duration of stay in Poland

Most of the students decided to stay in Poland for one semester (almost 68%), while 29% of them planned to spend a full academic year. 3% of students studied for a shorter time than one semester (Figure 10).



**Figure 10.**  
Duration of Erasmus study

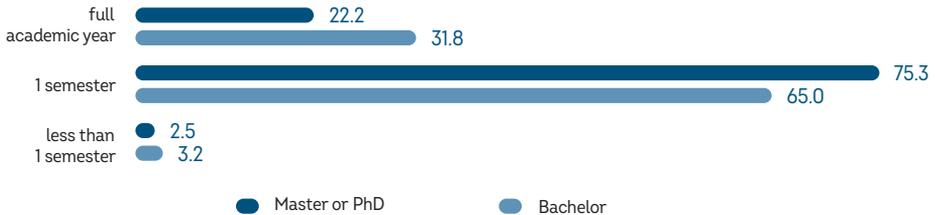


Source: own work.

The BA students were more likely to spend two semesters in Poland than MA or PhD students – 32% of Bachelor students (first-cycle) are spending full academic year in Poland, compared to 22% of Master or PhD students (Figure 11).



**Figure 11.**  
Duration of Erasmus studies vs. study cycle (%)

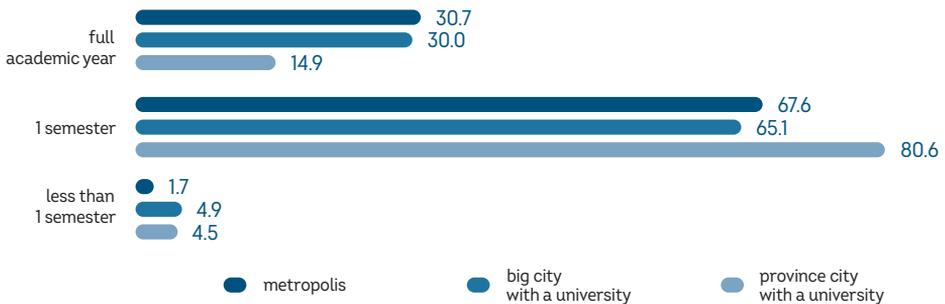


Source: own work.

The city where the university is located determines the decision of students in terms of semesters spent in Poland. Among survey participants studying in provincial cities, where State Higher Vocational Schools educating at the Bachelor level are located, 81% completed one semester and 15% two semesters. On the other hand, when it comes to universities located in large university cities and metropolises, more students decided to study for the whole academic year (Figure 12).



**Figure 12.**  
Duration of Erasmus studies vs. city of residence in Poland (%)



Source: own work.

### Living in Poland or "virtual Erasmus"?

Due to the prevailing conditions in the academic year 2020/2021, Erasmus+ Programme students in higher education sector could choose between physically moving to and studying in the destination country, or studying online – thus remaining in their home country

or other location, but participating online in the courses and seminars. During the pandemic, all universities were obliged to introduce the remote/distance learning form as compulsory ("virtual Erasmus").

Among Erasmus students in Poland, most students decided to actually move to the country of their Erasmus, with small numbers of students choosing virtual Erasmus (studying online when living in their home country, or another location). Among the respondents, **79% of students decided to come to Poland** and declared that they stayed in Poland throughout the whole winter semester. 13% spent one part of the semester in Poland and another in their home country. Only less than 8% of students (74 people) participated in the classes in remote forms only (Figure 13).



**Figure 13.**  
Form of participation in Erasmus+ studies

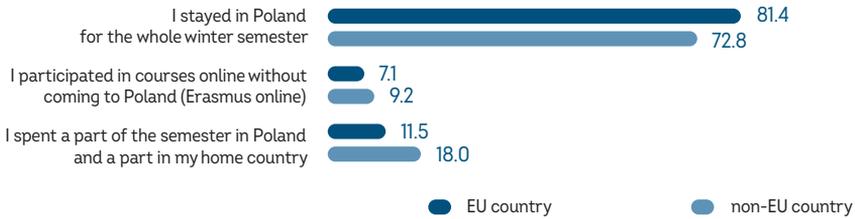


Source: own work.

The research showed that Erasmus students from EU countries more often decided to stay in Poland (slightly more than 80%) than students from non-EU countries (slightly more than 70%). The latter respondents chose the option of spending some time in Poland and partially in their own country (18%) much more often than EU students (11.5%). Also, among non-EU students, more people decided to study online without leaving their home country (slightly over 9%) - (Figure 14). The decision of not leaving the country of origin could have been potentially based on foreseen administrative difficulties with obtaining visa, in particular in the pandemic circumstances.



**Figure 14.**  
Form of study of EU vs. non-EU students (%)



*Source: own work.*

Regarding the variables impacting the decision on the form and the place of studying in the COVID-19 circumstances, the city of studying seems to be the most important determinant. Among people who decided to study online and not come to Poland, almost every fifth respondent was registered at the higher education institution located in a province city in Poland. Respondents studying in large university cities and metropolises chose this form of studies much less frequently, rather aiming at spending the whole semester in Poland. Students studying in small, county-based towns could be afraid that a lockdown more than students from large cities. They might have been worried that the university authorities would not take care of their needs, as in the case of large universities in bigger cities. Therefore, more often than other Erasmus students, they decided to study remotely and stay in their country of origin.

## Motivations for studying in Poland

In this section, we will look into the decision-making process of Erasmus participants. The motivations for going abroad not only strongly express the more practical reasons for going abroad (e.g. learning language), but also reveal the students' life goals and orientations - in relation to social life, academic life, intercultural encounters, future migration (Murphy-Lejeune 2002; Krzaklewska 2008). They also constitute an important frame of reference for the evaluation of the stay on the whole.

### Reasons for going abroad

Erasmus students often indicate the importance of multiple factors for going abroad (Aresi et al. 2018; Lesjak et al. 2015). Thus, in our survey, in order to disentangle the most prominent ones, students were asked to choose three most important reasons for going abroad from the list of potential motivations.

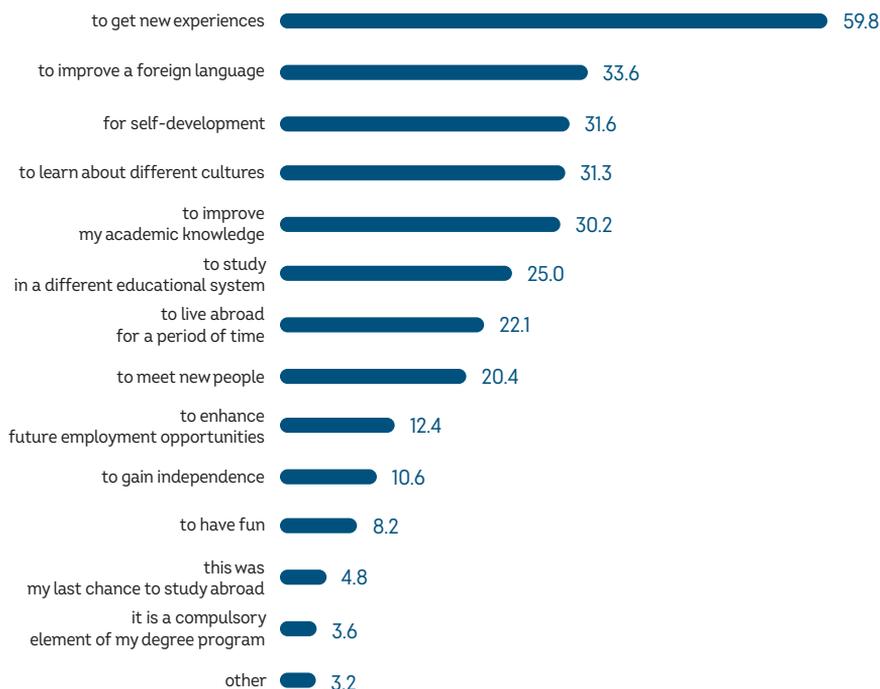
Most students decided to take part in the Erasmus exchange **to get new experiences** – this motivation was selected by almost 60% of the respondents in the study (Figure 15).



**Figure 15.**

Reasons for studying in Poland (%)

*Why did you decide to study abroad as an exchange student?*



Source: own work.

It proves the results of other research in the area stressing the importance of experiential dimension of stay abroad (Krzaklewska and Krupnik 2005). In fact, the notion of novelty, difference and discovery were the words used in decision-making stories of focus group participants:



*So, for me it is a new experience – thanks to this new experience, we will meet new people, we will discover new culture. Just like today, when we are discussing a very important topic. We will have new knowledge if we talk about science, it is like a new experience generally. In all of our lives. We will discover new food, new kinds of clothes, new ways of thinking, there are many things that we will discover.*

[W6, Toruń/Zielona Góra]


*I think the factors were basically that I wanted to change. As I said before, weather, culture, it is something really different from Spain, also learning to live alone, trying to handle your problems by yourself and not with the help of your parents, family, friends. Also, making new friends.*  
 [M2, Poznań]

The second most often selected motivation is **improving a foreign language** competency (33.6%). This motivation is common among exchange students, but as we will see it relates to different language competencies, not just the local language (Polish), but also English as *lingua franca* of Erasmus students.


*So, what factors were the most important? The first was to improve my English.*  
 [M1, Poznań]

Also, every third respondent chose to study abroad for **self-development**. In the focus group, students spoke about challenging themselves:


*I want to challenge myself in European university and therefore I am there. I am really happy to have this opportunity to learn in university of Łódź.*  
 [M1, Łódź]

Similarly - one third wanted to **learn about different cultures**. This aspect was strongly related to the choice of Poland as a destination, as it will be discussed in the following section.


*I wanted to know the local conditions and customs of other countries and it happened.*  
 [W5, Toruń/Zielona Góra]


*I wanted to get in touch with different cultures and improve my English, make different friends, learn new profession and gain knowledge. I spent Easter for the first time with new friends and learnt something about Polish culture. It was a surprise.*  
 [W4, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

The educational motivations were important for about one-third of the sample – 30% indicated that they wanted to **improve their academic knowledge**, while 25% of students wanted to **study in a different educational system**. It is interesting that in students declarations, motivations for staying abroad do not circulate so much around **labour market preparations** – only 12% declare that they chose to study abroad to enhance future employment opportunities. But in the focus group interviews, in particular MA and PhD, students referred to their long term plans, often of an academic career.

*SS I came to Poland because I am working on engineering of materials and energy and here in Poland, and especially in Nicolaus Copernicus University, they are working in the same field of work. For this reason, I came to get more experience, gain new knowledge.*

[W1, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

Other important motivations relate to the **social dimension of the stay** – meeting new people (20%), gaining independence (11%), having fun (8%). As many as 22% of students indicated that they wanted to **live abroad for a period of time**. For some, as focus group participants stressed, it could have been the first extended stay abroad, which was declared particularly by students from non-EU countries (Russia or China):

*SS First of all, I have never been abroad before and it was kind of a first chance for me to go abroad, and for such a long period of time.*

[W4, Kraków]

The fewest numbers of respondents chose options that relate to **formal requirement for studying abroad** (3.6%) – it seems that studying abroad is still a voluntary endeavor. Importantly, studying abroad was declared a compulsory element only by students from EU, showing that some European higher education institutions engrain mobility experiences within their study programmes.

About 5% of students, declared that the Erasmus exchange was their **last chance to study abroad**. This could have been the reason for why they did not decide to postpone Erasmus after the pandemic ceases. As a student declares, an Erasmus opportunity happens mostly during university years, and it is good to use it before entering labour market:

*SS I am currently in my Master's degree and in my Bachelor's. I have never really thought about going abroad, because in high school I have*

*been in United States for a year. So, I always wanted to finish my degrees fast. But then the professors from my Master's told me about the opportunities to go abroad with scholarship of the Erasmus+ Programme, and I just thought, why not just apply for another experience? Now it is the time, because I am young and I do not know when will I come back, as I am almost done with my studies.*

[W2, Łódź]

There were important **differences between students from the EU and from countries outside the EU in relation to the motivations for going abroad**. Students from outside the EU showed academic motivations much more often – 45% of non-EU students selected this answer option, compared to 24% EU students. Also, students from outside the EU preferred to study in a different educational system and aimed at enhancing their future employment opportunities. For EU students, experience of living abroad was more important, they targeted self-development more often than non-EU students. Also, in comparison, the students from EU had more experiential, non-academic motivations: generally, they wanted more often to have fun, meet new people and gain independence through their stay abroad.

**Age** proved to be important when considering going to study abroad. Usually, younger students aimed at gathering new experiences and wanted to learn about different cultures, while gaining independence through living abroad. In comparison, older students wanted to enhance their employment prospects and academic knowledge. **Female students** more frequently than male ones chose self-development as their motivation and aimed at improving foreign language skills, whereas **male** students more often than female peers aimed at enhancing their academic knowledge, and at the same time, more of them looked to have fun as opposed to female students. Those who went to **bigger cities** were more likely to focus on self-development and meeting new people during their stay abroad, while those who went to smaller academic cities more often were aiming at academic goals in comparison to big cities students.

Finally, students who had experienced an Erasmus study beforehand, stressed in the focus groups the impact of their previous experience on the decision to go abroad again:



*[My decision] was mainly based on experience I already had from an Erasmus I did in my Bachelor's. Then, I was in France and I liked it a lot. And I found so many friends there. I learnt a lot about French language and culture. I wanted to use that chance to do it again in another country for my Master's.*

[M1, Kraków]

## The impact of COVID on decision-making

When considering the impact on the COVID-19 pandemic on decision making process, it is first important to look at the **timing of the decision for going abroad** in relation to pandemic outburst. The students that replied to the survey applied to their Erasmus stay abroad at different moments in time. A large share of the respondents did not know about the COVID-19 when deciding to go abroad (almost 40%) or have just learnt about it (about 20%). However, another 40% knew about the pandemic circumstances long before applying. Students from outside the EU generally knew about COVID-19 more often long before applying, while students from the European Union usually learnt about it after applying (Figure 16).



**Figure 16.**  
COVID-19 outbreak and the Erasmus application timing  
*When did you learn about the COVID-19 pandemic?*



*Source: own work.*

Some students (19%) actually felt that they had no other choice than to go abroad, due to the fact that application process started for them before the pandemic. Still, most of the students did not agree with this statement, which indicates that it was their actual choice to go abroad no matter the external conditions (Figure 17).



**Figure 17.**  
Freedom of choice regarding Erasmus stay (%)  
*The application process started before the pandemic, so I felt I had no other choice.*



*Source: own work.*

Students deciding during the pandemic on whether to go abroad or not had different strategies for navigating COVID-19 circumstances. We may say that the strategy of postponing the stay abroad was quite common – so students, if possible, postponed their stay abroad from the first to the second semester.

☺☺ *First, I applied for the winter semester, but then I was thinking about this pandemic situation. What happened then? I made my choice. And yeah, I was first thinking about going to Kraków in autumn, but then I decided that probably everything is going to be closed. [...] And in the summer, I texted my coordinator, my home coordinator, that I would like to change my semester for the summer semester. [...] I was lucky enough that everything was about to be open soon.*

[W4, Kraków]

In some cases, the students could not take decision by themselves, as the external circumstances were decisive. Some students lost other mobility opportunities (e.g. universities were not accepting students), others could not leave their country during the first semester:

☺☺ *For me, I was supposed to come in the first semester, but our region got really bad with COVID. So the region was closed for everyone. We could not go out.*

[W2, Lublin]

☺☺ *For me, my application started exactly when the pandemic started. So I applied in March. And so I wasn't sure what is going to happen. So I chose to come for the second semester. And I was not so full of knowledge about the pandemic. So I said, even though I will be taking online classes, it will still be an experience because it is Erasmus and you can feel like it is a different experience, even with restrictions.*

[W1, Lublin]

As shown in the above quote, **students want to utilise available opportunities despite the restrictions**, and believed that even during the pandemic the stay would still become valuable. There was some hope for the students that even in these particular conditions, their stay abroad would prove to be fruitful (or at least it would be more fruitful than staying at home university). Few participants mentioned that the pandemic is not happening only

in Poland, but in their countries as well, so this is just an overarching condition to which one needs to adapt.

*SS I do think that with the situation being that unstable, every Erasmus student thought “do I really want to go? Should I go? Is it going to be good or bad?”. So, I think that the thoughts are there. And I think for me the fears were the lack of interaction with people and social aspect, because people want to do Erasmus to get to know people, to be with different cultures, and to just be together as a group with such a horizon of different people, and I knew that this aspect will be lacking, so this was the fear that made me hesitant.*

[W1, Poznań]

*SS I just thought that I only have one chance in life to do this. At least now, and I wanted to do it despite COVID. Like I do not want my life to stop because of the pandemic. I will try to fix it as best I can.*

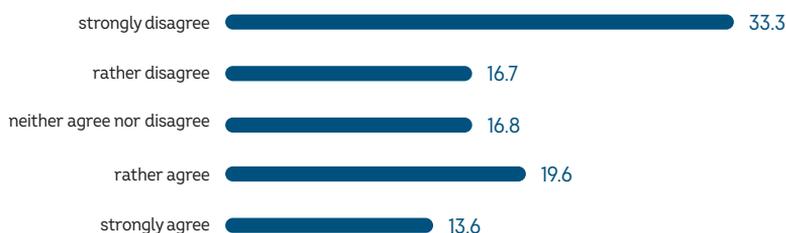
[W2, Lublin]

To learn about potential impact on COVID-19 on student motivations, we asked students about the role of Erasmus stay abroad in relation to COVID-19 pandemic situation in their own country. **About one-third of students agreed that the stay abroad was an escape from the restrictions in their countries**, with 14% strongly agreeing with this statement. This motivation for going abroad was more often present among younger students, female students, and those from EU. Additionally, students who chose to study in a metropolis or a big city agreed with it more often, in comparison to those who studied in a smaller university town (Figure 18).



**Figure 18.**

Escaping pandemic through Erasmus stay abroad (%)  
*The Erasmus stay abroad was an escape from the COVID-19 restrictions in my country.*



Source: own work.

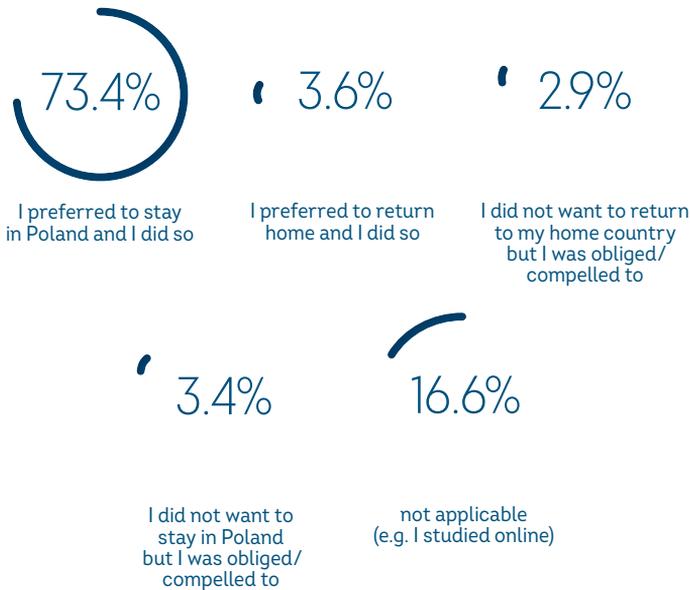
Finally, we also asked students about the particular moment of their stay abroad. In October 2020, more strict restrictions in relation to COVID-19 were introduced in Poland, and we wondered if this situation encouraged students to return to their home countries. As it turned out, this situation did not make the students staying in Poland want to go back home. 73% of them preferred to stay in Poland and did so. As many as 4% of students returned home on their will. Still, some students could not make their preferred decisions – they were either obliged to stay in Poland (3%), or could not return home (3%) – (Figure 19).



**Figure 19.**

Deliberating return home during the second wave of pandemic in October 2020

*Did you consider going back to your country?*



*Source: own work.*

### Choosing Poland as an Erasmus destination

Poland – as a country of the Erasmus stay – was for most of the respondents (70%) the first choice destination, while 30% did not choose Poland as their first choice. Non-EU students declared that Poland was their first choice more often than EU students (Figure 20).



**Figure 20.**  
Poland: a first choice country?  
*Was Poland your first choice for this stay?*

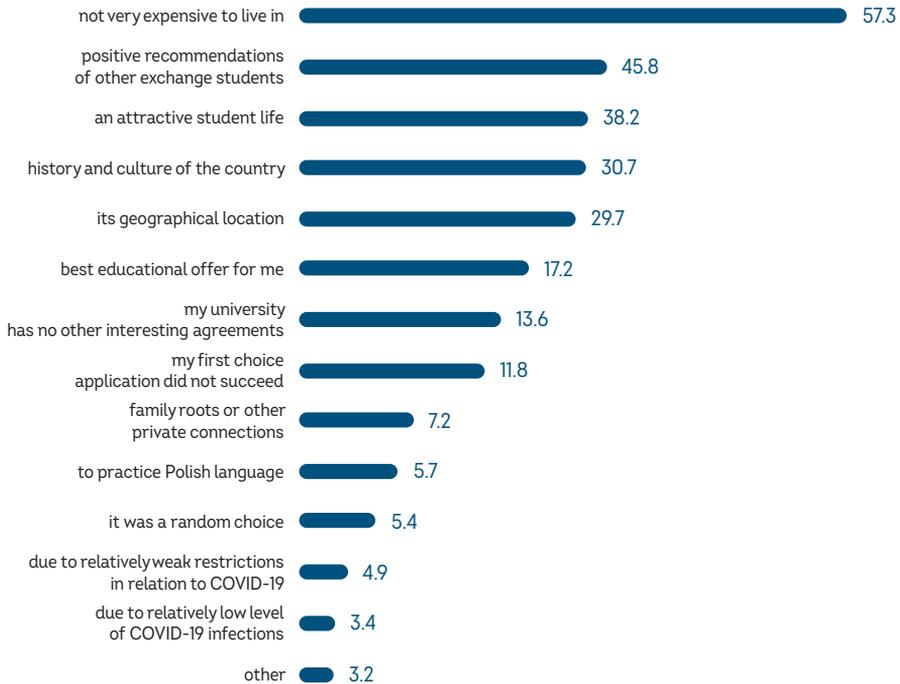


*Source: own work.*

The reasons for choosing Poland vary between students, with the **affordability of living in Poland** being the most often selected reason (57%). It is also important to say that almost half of the students declare that this destination received **positive recommendations of other exchange students** – and that these constituted a solid basis for choosing this country. Poland also appears to be known among students for its **attractive student life, appealing history and culture** and its **good geographical location**. This last option is an important rationale, especially outside of the pandemic period when students are able to travel freely around Poland’s neighboring countries. **The academic value of studying in Poland** is not on the top of the list – but still, 17% of students indicated that it was the best educational offer for them. The availability of offers also plays a role – with 14% of respondents claiming that it was the best among other available options, or that it was their backup option after the first choice application did not succeed. A smaller share of students (7%) mentioned having family roots or other private connections to Poland and 6% declared that they wanted to practice the Polish language. Lastly, the COVID-19 situation in Poland (level of restriction or infections) did not impact the choice of this destination greatly (Figure 21).



**Figure 21.**  
Reasons for choosing Poland (%)  
*Why did you choose Poland?*



*Source: own work.*

The reasons for choosing Poland varied between women and men, age groups, level of studies, students from and outside of the EU, as well as cities in terms of their size. It is important to stress that as opposed to their younger peers, older students generally chose Poland as they identified Poland as the best education offer for them, or due to its history and culture. Also, MA students chose Poland due to its cultural context or to practice Polish language, in comparison to BA students. Attractiveness of student life was more frequently chosen as the reason to study in Poland by younger students, as well as by male students. Female students on the other hand, as well as those from the EU, more often indicated the desire to learn Polish language, their Polish roots or private connections. Finally, non-EU students usually indicated that their university had no other interesting agreements.

Let us look in more detail into the decision in regard to coming to Poland for the Erasmus exchange. For some students, Poland was their first choice destination, and they often offered complex explanations for their decision on coming to Poland, as presented in the quotation below, indicating different features of a city, university, region:

Poland was my first choice. There were lots of reasons, but mainly I have heard many good things about Jagiellonian University, and political science faculty specifically. I also heard about Kraków, like it is the most aristocratic place and part of Poland, and it contains the whole culture of the country. So, I did not even have one reason to refuse the proposal, so it was mainly my experience and my motivations, and right now I am really, really happy that I am there.

[W2, Kraków]

For others, Poland was not their first choice (30% of students surveyed). Students pointed to a series of events, private conditions and institutional limitations, including those related to the COVID-19 pandemic, that led them to come to Poland. Students also referred to **limited choice of mobility options**, in which case, even if formally Poland was their first choice, in practice it was “the only” or “the best” choice. In some cases, the decision making process in relation to choice of Poland was based on available options. Still, as shown in the example below, even if the destination was “thrown” upon them, this may had positive outcomes for them:

Both universities have the Erasmus agreements with the Nicolaus Copernicus University. So, that is the point. It is not about choice, because we usually do not have enough Erasmus agreements. But it is OK, because we have the same field, the equipment is good here and so is supervising. We are satisfied, really.

[W3, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

This “secondary” position of Poland as regards to preferred destination appears to be altered through **good recommendations of students, peers or family members**, which redirected the interest of students towards an unknown part of Europe. This recommendation was, as the survey data showed, very popular and it often became a strong motivator to actually choose Poland or a specific city. In some cases, students received recommendations in relation to the city or even university, while in other students wanted to go Poland or even to a particular region – and the choice of the city was secondary. Some students gathered knowledge about Poland through their trips or other stays in the country, while others through recommendations from the friends.

My first option was Wrocław University and the second was Jagiellonian University. And I had a cousin that was in Jagiellonian

*University and she told me Kraków is a beautiful city. It is a beautiful place. You have to go there. So, I said "OK, I am going to Kraków".*

[W3, Kraków]

☺☺ *And my brother also recommended Kraków because he was studying in Germany. And he told me that it is near to him and the learning experience is better. So, I did not hesitate. I chose Kraków.*

[W1, Kraków]

In fact, it is important to see the choice of Poland in relation to **the choice of the city and/or university**. Bigger and historical cities, such as Warsaw and Kraków, were targeted more frequently by the students, while smaller ones were rather a coincidence or an only available option. Actually, the popularity of some cities is notably visible. Students mentioned the attractiveness of a metropolis (Warsaw), historical heritage of touristic cities (Kraków), or the uniqueness of the atmosphere of an industrial city (Łódź). The other group of students reported choosing a particular university for its prestige (such as Jagiellonian University in Kraków), wide and high quality offer of academic courses (e.g. Poznań), renowned research center (e.g. physics in Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń). Smaller cities did not trigger such connotations - in such areas, students generally referred to choosing the country, with city being more a consequence of the available options. For example, in case of Lublin, none of the students have had any knowledge about the city before their arrival.

☺☺ *I only had two choices, it was between Poznań and a university in Germany. But I preferred to go to Poznań because some friends went there the last year and they told me it was really cool; the university was great and Poland was really beautiful. And also, because there were less restrictions caused by COVID-19 in Germany and also in France.*

[M1, Poznań]

☺☺ *I wanted to go to Sweden, not to Poland. But the money, it is complicated. So I ended up choosing Poland. And at that time, in my home university, I could only come to Lublin. That is why I chose it. I did not know anything about Lublin or Poland before.*

[W2, Lublin]

The qualitative interviews revealed that **students choose Poland for its “exotic” character** in comparison to Western European countries such as Spain, Germany or Italy. The fact that Poland is a distant country for them, they have never visited it, and that they do not have much knowledge about the country, turned out to be a trigger to choose this location for some students. This compliments discourses on experiencing something new: seeing a new country, or a region, exploring the unknown, emerged as another factors for choosing Poland as an Erasmus country:

So, I just applied, and then I thought I did not want to go to Spain, France, or Italy, because I feel like they are typical tourist countries for German people, or at least for my family; and if I went abroad, I wanted to go to a country that I do not know. But I wanted to know the country and learn something new. So, I applied for three Eastern European Union destinations, I think it was Łódź, a university in Bulgaria and in Lithuania.

[W2, Łódź]

Notably, students from outside the EU, particularly from more distant countries, did not have much knowledge about Poland, due to the geographical distance and no previous visits – as survey results shown, their choice options were more often limited.

I feel bad, because I think I did not have an image of Poland in my mind before coming here. Maybe because for me, it was such a country that is really far from the place where I was born. So, I really did not think about something specific. Actually, I was surprised that there were a lot of churches here and a lot of nature. I thought that Poland looked like a desert, but without vegetation or especially green spaces [laughs].

[W3, Kraków]

Furthermore, the **academic or educational criteria for choosing a destination were very important**. The prestige of the university, its quality of education, choice of courses – these reasons for choosing a given university or location were often mentioned by students in focus groups. Only 17% of respondents indicated that Poland was the best educational offer for them, which may suggest that focus group participants were more attracted to the educational aspects. However, it is possible that due to the pandemic situation, with limited opportunities of social life, the academic dimension of the stay became more pronounced than in previous years. In particular, PhD and MA students mentioned

the importance of the quality of teaching, supervising, laboratory access and the quality of courses as important decisive factors in relation to their choice of destination.

☺☺ *It was important for me to come here because of the courses that are offered here, they are very important for my Master's which I want to do, so that was also an aspect.*

[W1, Poznań]

Additionally, **Poland was chosen by people who have Polish origins** (this option was indicated by 7% of survey respondents), as in the case of a focus group participant of Polish parents. Not only this is a chance for them to practice language, but also to reconnect with their roots/origins in a different way than a family visit.

☺☺ *Moderator: Do you think Erasmus is something they [people with Polish origins] should do?*

*Student: So, I think if they really do not want to get out of the comfort zone, and want experience their origins I guess, that is a good experience. Because for me it was important. I spend a lot of time in Poland when I grew up and I still visit my family here, but I never had the chance to be in Poland for longer than a month, so there was something I was curious about and I wanted to experience.*

[W1, Poznań]

Students in focus groups mentioned similar reasons to those selected by survey respondents – affordability of living in Poland, history and culture of the country, the geographical location, beauty of the landscapes.

☺☺ *I also had these expectations because I read a lot about how Poland is famous by its diverse landscape, and especially the mountains and the villages, and it is all green and so on. So, yeah, I had this expectation and it proved to be true.*

[W1, Kraków]

An attractive student life was one of the most popular reasons for the choice of Poland – however, because of the COVID-19 pandemic this time it was not an expected part of the Erasmus experience. In fact, it was often perceived as a challenge – both by students

in the survey and focus groups. This will be further analysed in the chapter regarding the social life of Erasmus students.

## Expectations towards Erasmus

In this section, we will discuss the students' expectations towards the Erasmus+ Programme exchange on the basis of the students' accounts in the focus group discussions. These will be contrasted with the real experiences presented in the next sections.

### Predictions about Erasmus during the pandemic

During the focus group interviews, we showed the participants six pictures related to Erasmus experiences and asked them to choose the ones corresponding to the students' wishes and the ones that fit to the pandemic reality. The photos were chosen to represent diverse aspects of the Erasmus exchange – educational dimension, intercultural dimension, social aspect, travelling and exploring Poland.



Source: *Unsplash.com*: 1. Antenna, 2. Jan Fazlagić, 3. Helena Lopez, 4. Greg Trowman, 5. Clayton Cardinalli, 6. Dom Fou.

Students underlined that **the photos illustrated an ideal vision of participation in the programme** as well as their own experiences as Erasmus students in pre-pandemic times. Some of the study interviewees took part in an international exchange in the past, which allowed them to imagine typical activities undertaken during studies in a foreign country:

☺☺ *I know all these pictures from my first Erasmus, we had all of this when I was in France.*

[W1, Kraków]

☺☺ *I think everybody who comes to foreign country wants to explore it as much as possible.*

[W2, Łódź]

However, during the application process, **the participants were aware of specific conditions of the student exchange during the pandemic of COVID-19**. They were following infection statistics in both countries, sending and receiving, constantly comparing social restrictions and their potential effects:

☺☺ *In Poland there were very few infections, and in Germany, we had a lockdown. Yeah, I think there was a lockdown in Poland too. But in Poland, it did work from the beginning apparently, and in Germany it came not as late as in Italy, but still, we already had problems in spring. So, I hoped that maybe because of that it will be fine in Poland, but then in autumn it became much worse.*

[M1, Kraków]

By confronting expectations with the pandemic situation in the world, the students' requirements became more realistic. They assumed that there will be a lockdown in place during their stay in Poland:

☺☺ *So, I did not have any expectations in this direction because what I saw from my country was that everything was already shut down in spring. So, I expected it to become like this probably in autumn again.*

[M1, Kraków]

More importantly, some students expressed their opinion that they have expected greater restrictions than the ones they have faced after arriving in Poland:

☺☺ *What shocked me at the beginning was that the bars and restaurants were still open, because in my country they were closed for a while. I had the chance to go to one party.*

[W3, Kraków]

After arriving in Poland, some of the participants have realised that Polish people are not particularly concerned with the pandemic restrictions:

*SS It seems like here in Poland people do not really care about COVID.  
So it is fine if we travel and you know...*

[W2, Lublin]

Students were not afraid of contracting the coronavirus as much as their families were. As British researchers noted (Bristow and Gilland 2020), a significant percentage of young people have not felt extremely threatened by the potential infection. This is likely because the death rate in this demographic group is relatively low comparing to the older population. This is not fully true for our survey group however, as about 40% were in fact quite afraid of the COVID-19 virus.

*SS And even my parents told me, if you go, the chances of you getting infected are very high, compared to what the situation was. But back then, yes, there was a fear that if I go there, my chances of infection can be higher.*

[W2, Kraków]

Some of the students hoped until the very end that cafés and pubs would be open after arriving in Poland - for this reason, some have decided to postpone their arrival towards the second semester. Thus, it is not surprising that interviewees felt disappointed with the restrictions related to the pandemic. Particularly, activities that provided social integration were missed most:

*SS So, my expectations were like in these photos here. I thought that I would engage more with people. And I thought that when I would arrive here, someone would show me the place or something like that. But that did not happen. And I am quite disappointed, actually.*

[M2, Toruń/ZielonaGóra]

Returning to the pictures, the photo of a trip or a travel was the closest to the reality. As students said, travelling abroad was limited:

*SS I came here in March, so the restrictions were, I would say, bad, as we could not really cross the borders. In my opinion, because you have to*

*do quarantine, and also with Poland being a high-risk country, it makes it more difficult.*

[W1, Poznań]

Still, they could move within Poland despite the sanitary regime. During the interview, they noted that before coming to Poland they had heard it is famous for its diverse landscapes, especially the mountains and the green villages:

SS *Even during COVID, the picture of mountain and the view of the castle is quite familiar, because we all had an opportunity to go to excursions to see other cities and some nature. So, this was definitely part of my Erasmus experience and I continue to explore more of Poland.*

[W2, Kraków]

Considering the fact that coronavirus transmission outdoors is limited, and the possibility of an infection increases in crowded places, it is not surprising that Erasmus students choose outdoor activities. Though for some of the participants, it was not the desired solution, as they have rather aimed at group-experience as part of Erasmus:

SS *Also, for the travelling, we can do it with little groups, but normally the Erasmus Network in Poznań organises different trips, and it is just a feeling of being a group and doing it with more people. It is just a fun part and we can't experience it now.*

[W1, Poznań]

At the same time, the study participants expressed their understanding that due to the pandemic, it is impossible to organise a party:

SS *I do not know about the party thing [laughs] because it is obviously restricted, although it is still possible to get into such kind of events. But it is still dangerous because of such kind of exhilarated spread of virus.*

[W2, Kraków]

Research participants indicated that they expected to become a part of an international community during their Erasmus stay. This wish is one of the most important reasons for participation in the exchange. However, some of the interviewees found themselves in highly homogenous groups of students (e.g. in dormitory or in courses):

*SS I was completely lonely. And my roommates are Polish and they are not very talkative. So, the only activity that I had was the option to walk in the city. So I somehow became an expert. And I think I can go by myself without looking at a map, simply because I just walked too much during the winter. Wait, I have to say another thing. Something that did not fit my expectations is that I was expecting to meet more people, diverse people. But in my faculty, there are some courses, and in most of my courses I was the only one who was a foreigner. So, yeah, it feels weird because, everyone is Polish, and sometimes the teachers say something in Polish and then they say, “Oh no. Yeah, I forgot that there is one student that does not speak Polish”. And I was like, “oh OK, thank you, thank you for noticing”. But yeah, it is weird.*

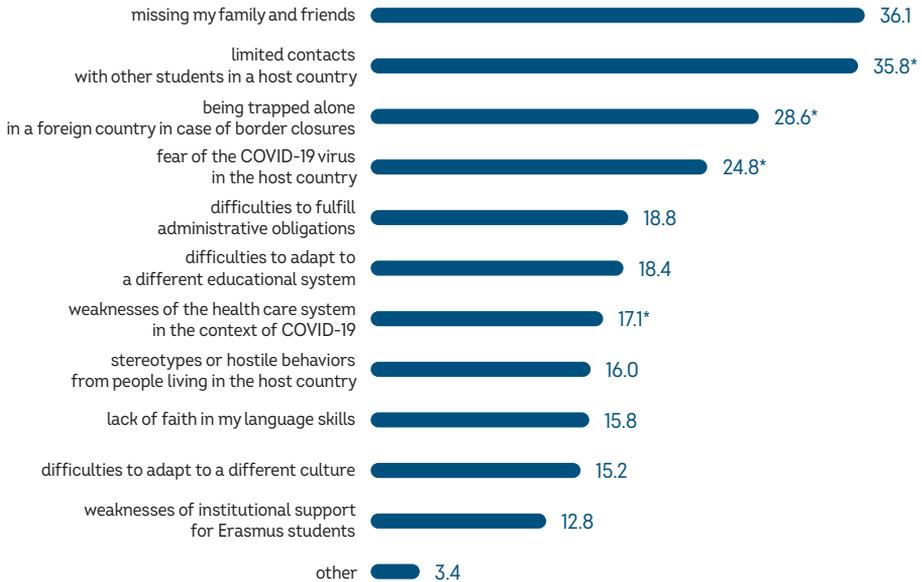
[W3, Kraków]

### Perceived challenges

Even if it seems that COVID-19 did not constitute a major reason for choosing Poland (which, before the start of the autumn semester, still had a relatively low level of COVID-19 infections), it was an important matter regarding challenges perceived in relation to stay abroad. In the Figure 22, the concerns directly related to COVID-19 context were marked with an asterisk. Students could select up to three most important challenges.

**Figure 22.**

Concerns before coming to Poland (%)

*Did you have any concerns about your Erasmus stay in Poland before the departure?*

\* *The concerns directly related to COVID-19 context.*

*Source: own work.*

The most common concern before departure was **missing family and friends (36%)**. While this concern was not directly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic situation, the lack of proximity to family members potentially endangered with infections could have been more of an issue during this period. The other choices that followed related directly to this context. Erasmus students were worried that they will have limited contacts with other students abroad, that they will be trapped alone in a foreign country in case of border closures, or they were afraid of the COVID-19 virus in the host country. These worries corresponded with the concerns about the weakness of the health care system in the context of COVID-19.

Additionally, other worries that were not directly related to COVID-19 were present, such as difficulties with fulfilling administrative obligations and adaptation to a different education system - both voiced by about 20% of respondents. A share of students were worried about stereotypes and hostile behaviours of people living in the host country (16%). Concerns regarding adaptation to a different culture and the lack of faith in one's language skills were declared by a similar number of students. Finally, some worries in relation to

the weakness of an institutional support for Erasmus students were present as well, which could have been more important in the times of epidemiological crisis than during other periods (Figure 22). Option “other” included, among others, statements in relation to the lack of concerns or foreseen challenges, worries regarding online education, accommodation or finances during Erasmus.

In the previous sections we have already analysed students' attitudes towards COVID-19 and related challenges. Beyond these, the students in the focus groups talked about the challenges concerning the destination country – communication with Polish people and their attitudes towards foreigners. First of all, they were worrying about the effective communication in Poland – as their skills in Polish were usually non-existent, they counted on English language:

 *I can add the same thing regarding the pandemic and the language because I did not know if people would understand if we spoke in English. Because when I went to Spain, I was speaking Spanish. I could communicate with people. However, here I did not know Polish. So, I started to learn only very basic words because I read that Polish people would highly encourage or would be super happy if you even say, “thank you” or “good morning” in their language. So, I learnt the basic words. So, the first thing – the language.*

[W1, Kraków]

Analysing students' perceptions of Poles, we can see that Erasmus participants were afraid of racism and ethnic discrimination in public places. Also, a female Muslim student was warned of potential reactions towards her wearing a hijab. However, they had not experienced such attitudes from Polish people:

 *So, I had this thing in my head that the moment I go, I am going to stand out, you know, in front of the people, as I am brown. And, yeah, that fear was there. Like, what happens if somebody just comes up to me and says something [...]? Right. Group attacking somebody just because they are a Muslim or something. [...] So, I have been here for more than two months and nothing of that sort happened. Yes, some very weird stares a couple of times. I think it was because of the color of his skin and because he looked different from some people. But I think it has been pretty good till now.*

[M2, Kraków]

Furthermore, the participants indicated that prior to their arrival, they had a stereotype in mind about Polish people being “cold and harsh”. It is important to remember the aforementioned fact that many students, particularly from more distant countries, did not have any ideas or perceptions regarding Poland or Poles. As the quotes below suggests, these stereotypes were challenged through their experience. Nevertheless, the language barrier is discussed as a reason for natives’ distance.

SS *I will just add one small comment about the Polish people. I had an expectation, because I read some articles and heard from some people, that Polish people were actually cold and harsh, especially to foreigners. Well, when I came here, I found out that actually that is not true, the whole experience is so radically different. Actually, when you get to know them, and when you need help from strange strangers, a strange Polish person for example, and maybe it is my subjective point of view, but I never came across such harsh reactions from them. Actually, they are really helpful. And even though there is a language barrier, and I only know like “hello” and “thank you” in Polish, they are really welcoming and they are willing to help you if you need guidance or so. So, I finally found out that there was a stereotype. Yeah. I just wanted to add that.*

[W2, Kraków]

SS *And also, the people here, I thought that the people would be colder, but people in here are actually so nice. And one thing that really surprised me is that you respect the rules too much. I mean, you never go when the lights are red. And that is really surprising for me, because in my country, if there are no cars, we can just pass, but here, no [laughs].*

[M2, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

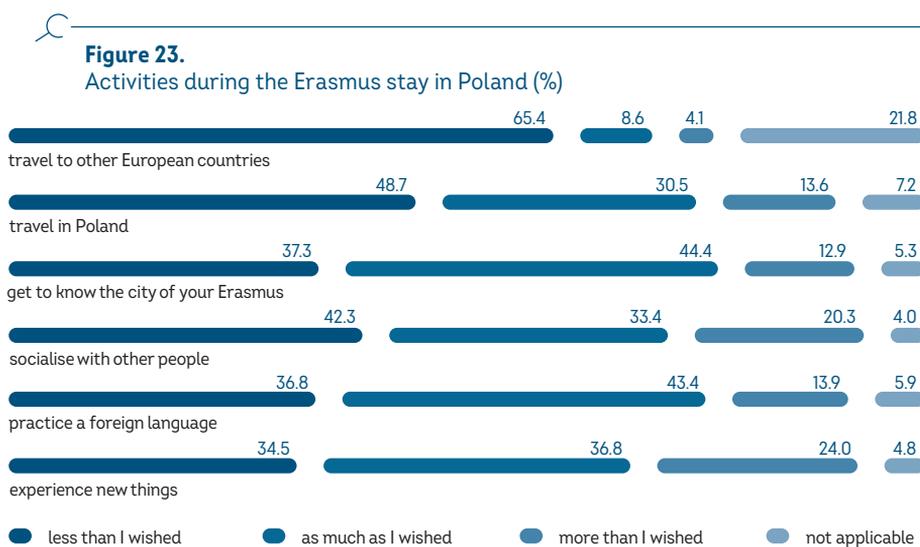
## Experiencing Erasmus stay abroad during the pandemic

Students, despite the pandemic, could treat the time of the student exchange as a period of intense cognitive and scientific experiences, and a time to develop soft skills, including those requiring relationships with others. The pandemic partially thwarted those plans.

## Activities in Poland

The pandemic seriously limited travelling plans of the students. More than half of the respondents (65%) say that they have not managed to travel to other European countries, and almost half (49%) that they have not managed to travel around Poland to the extent that they wished for. Also, about one-third of students did not manage to get to know their Erasmus city satisfactorily – but almost half fulfilled their plans in this regards. Additionally, there was a quite large group of students (42%) who were disappointed with their inability to socialise with other people. Every third respondent experienced new things and practiced a foreign language to a lesser extent than planned. It is important to remember that having new experiences was the main motivation for deciding to go on Erasmus, and about 60% of the students managed to fulfil it. Still, even if the pandemic was a limitation for the students' plans, with the exception of travelling across Europe and Poland, the number of students who have fulfilled or exceeded their plans is greater than those who had to lower their expectations (Figure 23).

Men were slightly more active than women – they reported more often that they had managed to get to know the city in which they studied and travel around Europe and Poland. Consequently, they were also more likely to believe that they had experienced new things, had contacts with other people, and this in turn was conducive to the practice of a foreign language.



Source: own work.

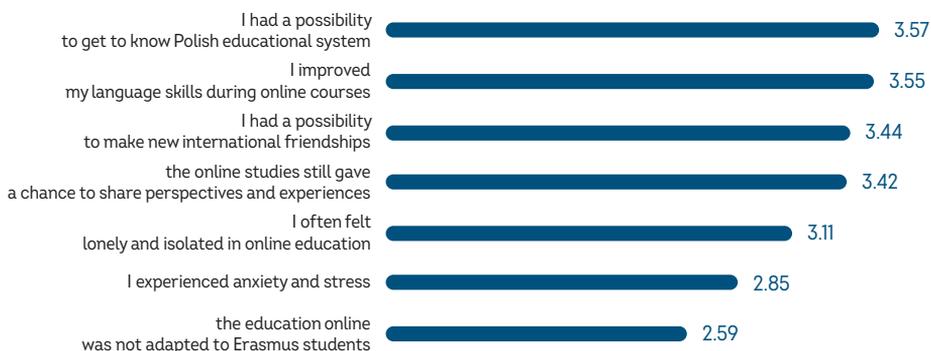
The types of activities undertaken and the implementation of plans varied depending on the level of studies. Students of younger years (Bachelor's degree) and students from outside of the EU used the opportunity to visit Poland and other European countries more frequently than their older peers. Higher degree students (especially at the MA degree level) got to know the city of their stay better and looked for new experiences here. It seems, however, that the assessment of experiences is primarily influenced by the age of the respondents – the older they were, the more the Erasmus experience differed from their previous ideas. Studies had a special impact on the assessment of their experiences – students who settled in smaller university cities were more satisfied with how much they managed to travel around the European countries and how well they got to know the city they lived in, but at the same time, such environment was not conducive to meeting new people, increasing language competences or new experiences. It can be assumed that the in-depth knowledge of the (small) city of studies during the pandemic period (closed cultural institutions, limitations on being with others) was more restrictive than in metropolises and large cities.

### Studying online

To evaluate the online education aspects, students indicated their agreement or disagreement on the scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Erasmus study participants declared that they had improved their language skills quite well and had a good opportunity to get to know the Polish education system, even through the means of virtual learning. Admittedly, they assessed that the educational system was generally adapted to the needs of Erasmus studies, and the remote form of studies allowed for the exchange of experiences and perspectives to a certain extent, however, it moderately induced feelings of loneliness and isolation. The students were unlikely to experience anxiety and stress (Figure 24).



**Figure 24.**  
Evaluation of studies online at the host university\*



\* 1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree.

Source: own work.

Female students were slightly more critical in their assessment on how online studies were adapted to the needs of international students. This may have caused them to feel a little more stressed and anxious, but it did not necessarily make them feel isolated. The latter was mainly felt by older students. Also, they were more likely to emphasise the moderate degree of adaptation of online studies to the needs of Erasmus students. In smaller university cities, students were more critical of the level of adaptation of on-line classes to their needs, and in their case, classes were rarely an opportunity for making friends, getting to know the Polish science system and exchanging perspectives and experiences.

Education was a dimension discussed at length within focus groups - in fact, the pandemic has made the educational dimension of studying abroad a primary focus. While in other circumstances it seemed that cultural and social aspects sometimes overshadowed the educational experience, during this particular period - even online - it has become a core of students' narrative of study abroad.

In the focus groups students discussed positive and negative aspects of their educational experience - the table below summarises different voices, even if contradictory, showing that experiences might have differed, depending on the faculty, specific courses or professors. But to sum up the positive side, students have emphasised the experience of different system of education and attractive offer of courses. Generally, they have positively evaluated Polish professors's knowledge and teaching styles, with some reservations that are presented on the other side of the table. Additional value came from the presence of international students for social science education, e.g. political science. On the negative side, students mainly mentioned the lack of social aspect of education online. While the online education was in general evaluated well, some students complained about passive education and classes that did not engage students. Students pointed to less demanding standards for Erasmus students as compared to home universities. The motivational aspects were also mentioned, in particular the impact of student engagement on other students' participation/ involvement in the class.



**Figure 25.**  
Positives and negatives of online education during the Erasmus studies

### Positives

different learning experience than in the home country

access to different courses than at home university

extensive knowledge of professors

availability of professors, friendliness, high engagement

different teaching styles of Polish professors

activating methods used by many Polish professors (as opposed to the professors from the home universities)

opportunity to learn from the experiences and insights of international students (especially valuable for students studying different disciplines in social science)

overall good assessment of the international offices' supporting students stay

good access to scientific articles databases at university

access to well-equipped laboratory, assistance at work

### Negatives

missing social aspect of education

passive education, no discussions with teachers and other students in courses

sometimes difficult communication between students and the professors

less demanding criteria for passing exams compared with home universities

difficulties in signing up for the courses

some students' low engagement in the classes (turned-off cameras, not responding to tutors requests during class etc.) had negative effect on the overall motivation of the more ambitious students

professors technical difficulties in relation to online education

old infrastructure (public)

necessity to have a single room/quiet place to manage online education (need to resign from a dorm)

internet connection issues

difficulty to manage education platforms

difficulty with motivation for study, distraction

Source: own work.

Unavoidably students compare education at home and at host university – this may be a source of learning, but sometimes also of frustration. One of the important points of comparison for the Erasmus students regarding the academic input is whether it is more or less difficult/challenging compared with their home universities. The educational experience depends on the country of origin or a particular university.



*Maybe it is our programme [...] I have experienced something weird because I have a lot of free time here, comparing to my home university. And also the courses are much, much easier. And sometimes I get*

*the impression that it is just because we are Erasmus students. So I would like to be more somehow, like on the same level as everyone else.*  
[W1, Lublin]

☺☺ *The online courses are much easier here than in my hometown. So I kind of like it.*  
[W3, Lublin]

☺☺ *I have learnt much from the teachers and I think the learning experience is far different from what I used to have in my country.*  
[M1, Lublin]

The **teaching styles used by the Polish professors** were often different from the ones used by the professors in the students' home universities. The quotes below indicate for interactive style of teaching, value of working in groups, direct approach of teachers:

☺☺ *And one more thing is that I love the way they teach classes and give time for students. Each and every class we have group discussion that is very amazing and it is very good to work in groups, which I miss in my home university. But here, the it is a real pleasure to learn.*  
[W2, Poznań]

☺☺ *I think the way the professors here in Kraków held their online lectures was really fine, in my opinion it was better than what I experienced in Germany because it was more direct, in such a way that we had all these courses live.*  
[M1, Kraków]

☺☺ *I am sure that online classes here are much more interactive than online Spanish classes. The online Spanish classes that I had before coming here were such that the professor talks, and nobody speaks, it was just a regular lecture. But here, it is much more interactive, and for example, when the professor tries to explain the history of Poland, you feel more a part of the country. I think that is the difference.*  
[M2, Poznań]

On the other hand, there were some negative voices regarding the passive, lecture-oriented courses:

☺☺ *Oh yes. I would like to talk about classes. I have two categories when we are talking about classes. So, we have a class where you can be interactive, and a class in which you can keep your mouth shut and just listen to your teacher. [...] So, this can be a little bit frustrating, a little bit annoying, like a buzzkill. So, classes are really important. And for me, this is a negative aspect. Even though I have three classes which are amazing, I like the teachers and everything. And the teacher is bringing experts [...] I was expecting to have more interactive classes because it has been the second semester of pandemic. So, that is why.*

[M3, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

When it comes to the quality of education, students have specific criteria for the evaluation of the courses. First one is **whether the courses are “easy” or “difficult”**. Perhaps the emphasis on the “Erasmus experience” by teachers overshadows and diminishes the importance of academic skills for incoming students, and in effect it lowers the academic standards:

☺☺ *It is a kind of a paradox because all of our teachers are really well-prepared. Like some of them showed us their city, and they have like really great careers, research. So they are really well-prepared, but they are not giving us higher-difficulty information.*

[W1, Lublin]

That includes not being strict or demanding enough towards less ambitious students:

☺☺ *Some students decide not to do some presentations and they get away with it. So I think that might be the only disadvantage, but to me, it is not of that big importance.*

[M1, Lublin]

Another criteria are the **didactic methods used by the teachers** – preferably interactive, and **the content of courses** – resulting in gained knowledge and skills:

”” And one other thing is that classes are more interactive, compared to my previous university. There are more assignments, more class tests, more exams. But here, it is interaction, group work, so you get to learn much about the course, not things from the book but rather outside of the book, which I think is of more importance.

[M1, Lublin]

”” In my country I study geology. It is about rocks, but here I have this important chance to have online courses about soils, and these are very important things for me. So I gained knowledge, not just about rocks, but some new things, for example, international soil classification.

[W6, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

In the case of international education, **language skills of the academic teachers** are crucial. If they are substandard, no matter how well-qualified the teacher is in his or her academic field, the quality of education suffers:

”” I used to have teachers who were not very fluent in English but they had to teach us in English. So explanations were not that very clear. But right here, the teachers are very fluent in English. So I think it is better in that sense. And one other thing is that classes are more interactive, compared to my previous university.

[M1, Lublin]

Another criterion for the quality of education is **the number of students in a course**. Usually, classes for Erasmus students tend to be smaller in size, and less students from different academic programmes are mixed in one class. The small size of the class would naturally support more personal touch and interaction. However, it was not always the case.

”” So for me, the good part to start with, there were very few participants in our courses, maybe 8 or 9, I do not know for sure right now. But in my home university, my group was formed out of 60 people.

[W1, Lublin]

”” But the not-so-good part was the fact that even though we were so few, I felt like I did not get proper feedback.

[W1, Lublin]

Studying in the international environment, such as the Erasmus Programme, gives additional benefits to those students who study subjects that naturally involve international dimensions. In the following case, the **presence of international students actually adds value and constitutes a vital component of the educational experience**:

☺☺ *I want to agree about the faculty of international and political studies because it is really diverse and the courses that I am taking are taught in English. And I think most of them have Erasmus+ students and from different backgrounds, maybe from Asia, Africa and also from Europe. [...] it is interesting when somebody ask a question about the pandemic, let us say, and they relate to politics or international relations. And it is interesting how every student sees how his government or his country deals with such an issue, is like a different issue on the different any or any other like issues.*  
[W1, Kraków]

At the heart of the Erasmus+ Programme lies the choice of subjects which the student wants to take on. Unfortunately, sometimes such expectations cannot be met if the university will not launch the course due to the low number of students who signed up, or if the course was cancelled:

☺☺ *In my learning agreement, when I came here, I wanted to study some subjects related with big data and I applied to them. They told me it was okay, but when I came here, those subjects were not filled with enough people. So, I had to switch to other subjects and I like them, but I wanted to learn something about big data and IT, and I had to change it.*  
[M2, Poznań]

The negative side of online education was a low level of engagement of some students, which demotivated and frustrated not only the professors, but also other students who are more interested in participating in the class:

☺☺ *Some people, they just log in on the courses and they do not really attend it. So professors try to make it interactive, but nobody works, and I think sometimes it is just not fun when the professor trusted you with more interactive stuff and there is silence and nobody does anything. Through the screen professors can't see what we are doing. The group works, they are fun, but it happened several times that we had to do*

*something in pairs, and the other student was not there, so I was in a room with them for 15 minutes, but they did not answer. So that is the barriers of the distance, that I would say I do not really like.*

[W1, Poznań]

While all of the students expressed regret that they cannot participate in real classes, at the same time some of them have actually highlighted the positive sides of online education – including lack of fear to speak up online or ability to travel while studying.

*Given the circumstances, I think that it is very structured and well-organised. I really like that everything is online, it is like life, we still have interaction. I also think that maybe a positive thing is that because we do not have cameras on, it is very anonymous, and people tend to ask more, because they are not afraid of others' opinion, I guess. And I really like that the classes are smaller, because in Germany, they are huge in Economics, and it is very personal here. We normally do not have the personal interaction in Germany. Also, I really experienced that the professors care about the students, they ask how we are and it is very personal.*

[W1, Poznań]

### Social contacts and bonds

Due to the pandemic, the social contacts that students could make were quite limited. This is all the more important to determine the extent to which the place of the deepened their feeling of isolation, or allowed them to maintain social contacts and create social bonds.

In total, **87% of the surveyed students lived in conditions that allowed them to socialise.** Out of these, 57% lived in dormitories and 28% in student housing. Additionally, 2% of the respondents were people who changed their place of residence during their stay in Poland, but each time shared an apartment with others or were adjacent to them (dormitory).

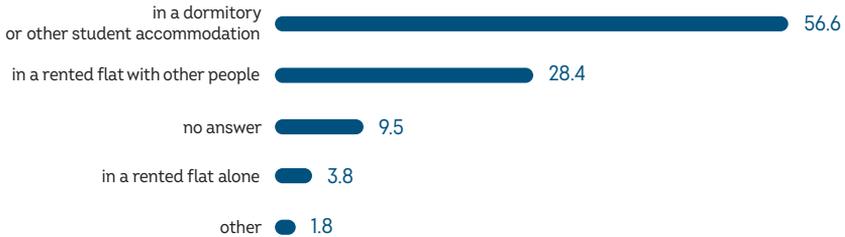
**Only few students (4%) decided to live alone in a rented apartment.** They were more commonly men than women. The decision to live alone was largely determined by the age of the respondents and the level of studies – such decision was more often made by older students, and at the same time of the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> degree, coming from the European Union countries. Higher degree students, especially from the EU, were also more likely to decide

to live with other people in a rented apartment. This was especially true of people studying in metropolises (Figure 26).



**Figure 26.**

Accommodation during Erasmus stay in Poland (%)



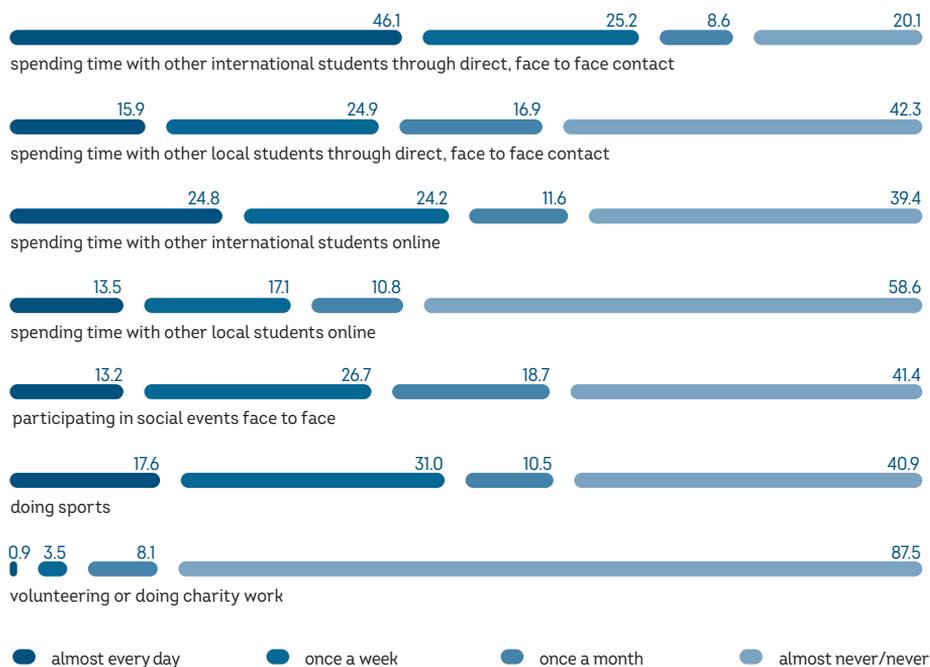
*Source: own work.*

**Social contacts of the surveyed students were directed towards other foreign students, both direct and online.** Almost half of Erasmus students spent time with other international students through face-to-face contact on the daily basis. Still, the share of students who engaged in contacts with local students was relatively high – with 16% doing it everyday and 25% at least once a week. It is possible that the pandemic actually intensified contacts with local students, e.g. when living together in dormitories. We should also notice that **some students may felt highly isolated**, as 20% have never spent any face-to-face time with other international students.

**Less than half of the students participated in face-to-face social events regularly** – 13% participated in such events every day (mainly those living in rented rooms with others), and 27% – once a week. During the pandemic, engagement in **volunteer activities or charity work was very low** – however, it usually is as low in normal circumstances. **A good share of students were engaged in the sport activities** (with half of students engaging in them at least once a week) – but it seems that practicing sports could also be of an individual character, and not necessarily favor social contacts (Figure 27).



**Figure 27.**  
Extracurricular activities: spending free time in Poland (%)



Source: own work.

Direct contacts with other foreign students were more likely to be made by younger students (both by age and degree), regardless of gender. Living in large cities and metropolises was conducive to such form of activity. Students from non-EU countries were more active. Additionally, younger, Bachelor students living outside of metropolises were more willing to make direct contact with local students. Perhaps this is due to the fact that in metropolises the community of foreign students is larger – therefore, it is easier to fulfil one's social needs within this group, without the need of expanding it to local students. Additionally, when there are not many groups of foreign students, contact with local students through study or project groups within the course becomes inevitable.

Younger students, students living in metropolises and big cities, and non-EU students (who more often live in dormitories) were more socially active. There are no significant gender differences in this respect. Such differences are revealed, however, in relation to practicing sport – men who studied in large and small cities (where there is generally greater acceptance for this form of spending free time) were more likely to engage in such activities.

In the previous chapter, we have discussed the students' expectations in terms of the Erasmus experience. One of the most important aspects of the international exchange is social life and being within an international group of young people (Cuzzocrea, Krzaklewska and Cairns 2021). As mentioned in the earlier section, **the pandemic restrictions had a great impact on the students social relations:**

*SS I would say that because of the pandemic, social life is restricted. We just cannot go into a bar and meet new people, so it is hard to get to know people, also outside from the Erasmus. Also, I do not live in a dormitory, so when I meet with people, it's not like we are in the same place, so we always have to plan it in advance. And it makes it harder, because we're not going to university, where we would normally meet each other every day. So, I think it is just more restricted.*

[W1, Poznań]

In addition to the restrictions, the ways of spending free time were influenced by the season and the weather. In fact, this year the weather in Poland was not very spring-like. Due to the cold weather, outdoor activities, eagerly chosen by students (as mentioned earlier), were limited. In the evaluations of the stay students frequently mentioned the weather as a negative of their stay in Poland. Luckily in May the weather improved and students could cherish social activities outdoors.

*SS But the first two months it was hard to do, because first I was sick, then I was in lockdown, then there was bad weather, so we were mainly hanging out in common kitchens. Or, when everybody had class, we just gathered around and everyone was sitting on their laptop. I feel that now it is easier because weather is good, you can just go for a picnic in the park, which I love to do, and there are so many parks in Łódź, so you can go every day to a different park. And recently, since the cafés are open, there is a possibility to meet new people too, people that you do not know. Because you can still go somewhere and not be inside. So, now I think it is better, at least it is like a new period of Erasmus that began now since lockdown is over and the weather is better.*

[W3, Łódź]

*SS Yes. And normally we like to eat together, it was better to be in a dorm, especially because it was really cold. So, we could not even walk,*

*but now, with this good weather, we can probably do barbecue and be outside more. But we are still limited.*

[W1, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

The ways of spending leisure time and opportunities to meet other people depend largely on accommodation. As we reported, more than half of survey interviewees (57%) live in a dormitory. More than quarter (28%) rent a flat with other people. **Dormitories were centers of social life in pandemic conditions:** students organised some barbecues and even “illegal parties” – still, it is important to mention that some students decided not to join such events in fear of infection.

☺☺ *I am living in a flat with other people so I have my own room, and inviting people over and have a drink is what we can still do. So, it helped that I live in a flat with other roommates. There is still interaction and I knew people from the beginning.*

[W1, Poznań]

☺☺ *If you are living in a flat, for example. If you are living in a dorm, maybe you could meet your roommate or other people living in the dorm. But if you are living in a flat, there is no possible way to meet other people.*

[W3, Kraków]

Despite positive attitude, the study participants indicated some challenges regarding their accommodation conditions – in particular, lack of possibility to invite people from outside dormitory. Some of the students feel lonely living in different place than their friends or co-nationals:

☺☺ *Sorry, I want to add something for social life because in the dorm you cannot invite our friends. For example, we have a friend [co-national]. She is living in one dorm and we do not have the possibility to let her come to us because we are in a different dorm. So, she feels alone there. And even we ask the reception to let her come, they do not accept. For me, it is like negative point. [...] it is because of COVID, not normally.*

[W1, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

Another disadvantage is living among international students, but without a chance to get to know natives or people who are not Erasmus students:

☺☺ *Because I got to meet with a lot of international students, but all from my university, because I am staying at the dorm. So I know the people from Erasmus, but I do not know the locals or other foreigners.*

[W1, Lublin]

The above reflection illustrates a phenomenon known in the literature as the “Erasmus bubble” (Cuzzocrea, Krzaklewska and Cairns 2021). In fact, the Erasmus bubble may have a pejorative connotation of a closed group of Erasmus students during an exchange who intensively interact and do not have any contact with local students nor communities. But, it can also be seen more positively as an internationalised learning environment, providing support to its members (*ibidem*) – which would be even more important in difficult pandemic conditions. It is worth noting that the study participants were aware of their **limited contacts beyond the group of international students**:

☺☺ *Yes, the only point is that we did not meet a lot of Polish people, Polish students.*

[M1, Poznań]

☺☺ *That is all for me; Definitely the Erasmus bubble is real.*

[M2, Poznań]

☺☺ *Of course, I socialise with a lot of people here, maybe more than 50 people from culturally different countries, so it is pretty nice experience. But for the Erasmus bubble, I think I can see it, because we did not meet a lot of Polish people here [...] But I met some Polish people, but maybe only 5 or 6 during these three months in Poznań.*

[M1, Poznań]

These reflections correspond to the results from the quantitative part of the study. We can see that 16% of participants indicated that they spend time with other local students through direct, face-to-face contact almost every day, as opposed to 46% of interviewees, who spend time with other international students in this manner.

Furthermore, student integration needs to be analysed, taking into account different stages of their stay in Poland. In the beginning, Erasmus students are willing to get to know each other beyond national circles. As time goes by, they tend to concentrate on relations within one ethnic group. We can call it “Bubble in the bubble”:

So, we are really trying to connect to other people, we have also met some fulltime students here, but unfortunately, they are Germans.  
[W2, Łódź]

For me, at the beginning, it was actually very nice and beautiful because I was meeting a lot of people and attended all the parties. I was speaking to everybody, I was coming up to everybody to say “hi”. And I got to know everybody so fast, even people from other dormitory. But like a month ago... people here started to speak more in their own language. And I am the only one from [country] here. So, it is very hard for me because they do not really speak English that much. They basically just say “hi” and they continue speaking in their own language. And for me it is so bad because I cannot really engage with them. And when I ask them, for example, to speak more in English, one time they even said, “it is your own problem as you can speak, for example, in Spanish”. I thought that was very, very strange.  
[M1, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

Also, the above reflections illustrate “the wow effect” – there are more opportunities to integrate with the other students during the first weeks after arriving in the country of Erasmus. One of the research students openly admitted that she benefited from joining the group of winter-semester students:

Yes, because my experience was a bit different from the second day that I got here. I heard that Erasmus students who are here from September, from the first semester were organising a kind of a gathering to get, you know, some other people, other students who just got here. That was the first gathering that I went to. I got to know so many people that day and we were in contact after that.  
[W2, Kraków]

One of the **biggest challenges concerning socialising with other people relate to online classes**. While students highly appreciate the teachers, they oftentimes underline the importance for classes at the university in terms of meeting people and maintaining social relations. They do not doubt that they are losing some social aspects due to online education, in particular if their classes - as in the example below- are mostly passive lectures, without group work and possibility to discuss:

SS *And what she said is actually correct, you know, because so many friends kept telling me “why do not you go and meet people”. I asked, “where am I going to meet people”, like you want me to go to the park, and when I see a guy or some girl walking, you just want me to stop them and start talking, you know? So, when I have attended classes, everybody’s cameras were switched off. Everybody’s microphone were switched off. [...] You do not have any sort of conversation with anybody. How am I supposed to, you know, socialize? And especially for a few months. So I think it is difficult.*

[M2, Kraków]

Additionally, the Erasmus Students Network organizes integrating events online. Even though the internet allows to maintain contact with other people, the study participants want real interaction and try to initiate offline meetings:

SS *Thanks to some WhatsApp groups from Erasmus students it is somehow easier, I can just send a message and if someone wants to hang out, we go somewhere, so it is pretty good here. If you want to meet some people who want to walk too, it is somehow easier.*

[W3, Łódź]

The focus group participants underlined **a lack or minimal contact with Polish people**. Even if the survey actually suggests quite regular meetings with Polish peers, with about one-quarter spending time with local students at once a week and 16% almost every day, it is perceived a challenge to make friends with Polish students:

SS *But I think, as W2 said, maybe Polish students are more difficult to be friends with. I have a lot of international friends, but not Polish friends. Not even one Polish person I have known.*

[W3, Lublin]

In the previous section, we noted the stereotype of Polish people being “cold and harsh”, explained by the language barrier. Thus, it is not surprising that using Polish language allows for integration with natives:

☺☺ *I can speak Polish with them and they do not have to try to speak English just for me, so I think it makes the social aspect easier.*

[W1, Poznań]

Contact with Poles is easier if students have Polish mentors. Sometimes, they consciously apply for such person to gain access to local student community.

☺☺ *I wrote previously that having a mentor is something positive, because in all my experiences, each time I applied for a mentor. But mostly not to get help, but to get to know more people, especially Polish. So really, I was lucky to have like three of them. They are so nice and helpful. And thanks of them, I know more Polish people because they introduced some friends of them. So, it is a good opportunity to apply to have a mentor for the Erasmus stay. And also, I got to know their families, their hometowns, so I can see the real culture of Poland. For example, Easter. Normally I do not celebrate Easter, but because of this opportunity to have a mentor, I know what Easter is, how you celebrate, all the culture, family. So, it is really good.*

[W1, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

It is worth nothing that students have different experiences when it comes to mentors. Not all of the participants were satisfied with their “local guides”. We will discuss the mentors’ support in more detail in the section on university support.

### Support from host universities

The students were asked to evaluate access to information from the host university in relation to different matters: both general and those related to the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Most students (about 60%) confirmed having enough information about the pandemic restrictions and local administrative procedures from their university. About half of the respondents indicated having access to information about what to do in case of infections, and also in case of problems with contacting teachers.

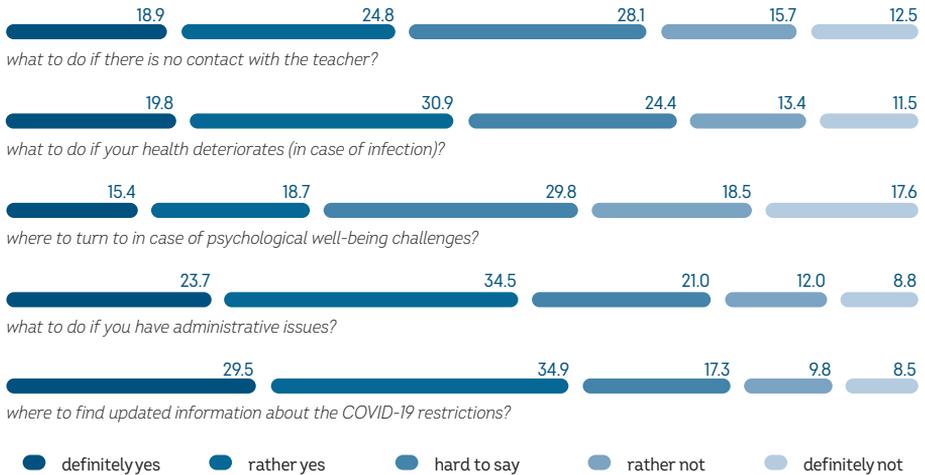
Fewer students reported they knew where to turn in case of psychological well-being challenges – about one-third of students revealed having it. Interestingly,

the respondents are divided into three groups of almost equal size when it comes to knowing where to turn for help in case of mental or psychological problems: those who did not have such knowledge, those who did and the respondents who could not judge it. This could be read in such a way that they did not experience such difficulties (or did not seek help) – (Figure 28).



**Figure 28.**

The availability of information from the hosting universities (%)  
*Do you know...*



*Source: own work.*

Although most students were well informed, the only exception to this positive evaluation occurrence is the lack of knowledge where to turn in a psychological crisis. Such knowledge was missing, especially among the 1<sup>st</sup> degree and younger students, those coming from outside the EU and those studying in small towns. It may result from the fact that in general, the network of psychological support is less developed in these locations.

Regarding the support system from the host university, there are three important elements to highlight here:

- organisation of arrival, including how well the university communicates the expectations to the incoming students and how it supports them in complying with visa procedures;
- the support from the international office during the stay, also in relation to course registration;

- the additional support of the mentor/buddy or student organisations such as ESN (not always applicable or available)<sup>3</sup>.

As regards the **organisation of the stay**, there were no complaints about the level of support and communication between the university and the students before their arrival. Just the opposite, many students reported their high satisfaction:

*For me I would say that the University of Łódź did a pretty good job with welcoming us, they sent a lot of emails also before the semester and also, which I really liked, there was a little guide how to come to Łódź. [...] when you emailed them, they were really fast in replying, so I really liked that. From my home university I think it was good too, but I think they were a little bit struggling with online communication.*

[W2, Łódź]

As the Erasmus+ Programme allows non-EU students to join the programme, such students have to go through more complicated bureaucratic procedures than their EU counterparts. Here, issues were reported by students coming for example from Algeria, Ukraine or Morocco. The problems encountered by non-EU Erasmus students were aggravated by the pandemic situation. Slow circulation of documents regarding their stay (in particular, an invitation letter from a university) coupled with the slow processing of the visa applications by the authorities was frustrating to the non-EU students. Objectively, these problems, however difficult, are beyond the scope of the National Agency and the hosting universities, at least in the short to medium run.

*I do not know if it is possible to make the procedure fast for the people who should apply for a visa or specially for the invitation letter, [...] we first should have received the original invitation letter. And it took time to be sent. And after that we could apply for appointments and because of COVID-19 it takes longer [...] if we had had the invitation letter in December or beginning of January we would have had enough time to manage and be on time here.*

[W2, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

<sup>3</sup> Erasmus Student Network Poland is part of one of the biggest non-profit student associations in Europe responsible for supporting and developing student exchange. Erasmus Student Network is present in more than 1,000 higher education institutions from 42 countries. In Poland ESN is divided into 29 local sections, which are present in most of the biggest cities in Poland. Source: [www.esn.pl](http://www.esn.pl) [accessed on: 22 June 2021]

To support Erasmus students, each university has a special position – the Erasmus coordinator within its structure – usually activated at the international office. The participants of focus group were of very high opinion about the quality of support from their side:

☺☺ *For me, Erasmus coordinator here in Poland has been very good. For example, I had a very bad toothache and the Erasmus coordinator helped me a lot. They found me a dentist. They also took me by car to o clinic and that was very good, actually. The coordinators from my home university, they helped a lot. They helped me with the embassy. And stuff like this and I did not have any issues.*

[M3, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

Even if the most common way of communication with the students was email, some students pointed out that they would prefer more personal contact and communication methods:

☺☺ *I do not really like email contact, I prefer calling people and discussing everything on the phone. So, I do not know, or at least I do not find any numbers for the university here in Poland, maybe they are, maybe not, I do not know. But I would love to have telephone support, where you can just call really quick and discuss everything over in five minutes. But I do not know if everybody else would like it.*

[W2, Łódź]

In order to additionally and in a more personal way support students and help them, especially during their first period in Poland, many universities established the system of mentors. Mentors are usually recruited from among Polish students studying at the host university in Poland. A mentor is a person that takes care of a student coming to Poland for an international exchange. The main goal is to help him or her with settling in a new city and to make the first, usually difficult days in a foreign environment a great fun, not a bad memory. According to the website of the Erasmus Student Network Poland, the Mentor Programme is “an awesome opportunity to make new, international friends which can lead to travelling around the world. It is also getting to know other cultures, practices and more importantly – improving your language skills” (ESN Mentor Programme n.d.). While there are mentor/buddy systems outside ESN, in our study the students related to the support from this association. Most students were of the positive opinion on the mentors:

Yes. I was asked from the ESN, if I wanted a mentor and I said “yes”. And I have a Polish student and she helps me with some questions. But I do not feel that she is my support here. I just feel it is like Google. I have something and she replies.

[W2, Lublin]

Unfortunately, I do not have a mentor, but I have a few friends who got one, and it seems like they have really great connection and really hang out a lot. And I also think that ESN Network, or part of the Erasmus Student Network, they organize a lot of events, also online. I only participated in one and then I met my friends. But I think they do a good job if you want to participate.

[W2, Łódź]

The support depended on the commitment and personality of the Polish mentor and, in some cases, the experience was not-so-positive, as the mentor was just a source of information and did not constitute a gateway to Polish society or other Polish students, or they just did not show up.

## Evaluating the participation in the Erasmus exchange

### Satisfaction with stay abroad and educational aspects

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students could choose the option of remote studies and participate in classes via the e-learning platform while staying in their country of origin, or live in Poland and comply with the regulations of the Minister of Health and presidents of universities regarding the situation. So, we asked students about their level of satisfaction with the overall experience of their stay abroad in Poland, as well as their level of satisfaction with the educational aspects of their Erasmus mobility. This differentiation was common in other studies on Erasmus (e.g. Krzaklewska and Krupnik 2006), with students usually more satisfied with the overall stay abroad than with their studies – as we see here, the pandemic altered a bit this result.

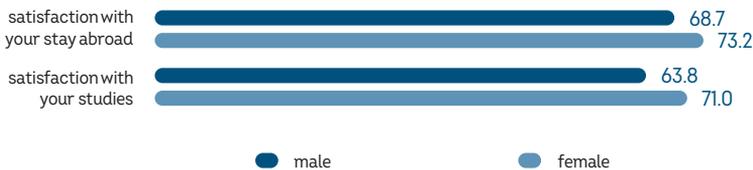
In general, students were rather satisfied both with their stay abroad, and with their studies. Slightly over 70% of the surveyed students expressed their satisfaction with the stay abroad (the average mark was 3.92 on the scale from 1 – very dissatisfied, to 5 – very satisfied). Similarly, almost 70% of respondents were satisfied with studying under the programme

(mean mark 3.84). About 20% of people were in the middle of the scale, but there were also people dissatisfied with both their stay abroad and their participation in the programme. Slightly more people expressed their dissatisfaction with the studies (10.2%) than with overall stay abroad (7.8%). Just to compare, in the focus groups, most common mark was 4 (rather satisfied), also indicating rather positive outlook, but with some reservations. In both survey and focus groups, it turned out that there was a small share of students heavily dissatisfied with their exchange during the pandemic.

Importantly, **socio-demographic variables influence the level of satisfaction with studying abroad and participation in the Erasmus+ programme in various ways** (gender, age, level of studies, place of study, country of origin). Female students are more satisfied both with their stay abroad and studies (Figure 29).



**Figure 29.**  
Satisfaction with the Erasmus stay by gender (%)



Source: own work.

Students with more academic experience (MA or PhD) are much more satisfied both with their studies and stay abroad. When assessing participation in the Erasmus exchange, more students express their dissatisfaction among BA students than MA and PhD students (Figure 30).



**Figure 30.**  
Satisfaction with the Erasmus stay by level of studies (%)

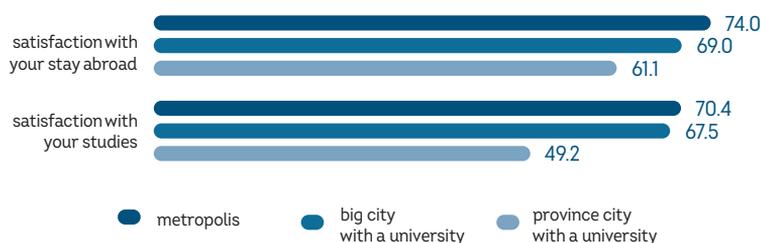


Source: own work.

The largest differences in the level of satisfaction in the examined aspects of Erasmus+ stay in Poland occur in case of the city of the study. A stay in an urban agglomeration or a large university city is generally considered more attractive, and in the face of the risk of COVID-19 infection, the attractiveness of provincial cities as places of study drops sharply. Among students studying in small cities, the level of dissatisfaction with both stay abroad and its educational dimension is relatively high. Among students studying in metropolitan and large university cities, the level of satisfaction is higher than among students studying in small cities. This applies to both of the analysed aspects, although the data shows that students are less satisfied with educational aspects than with overall aspects of their stay abroad (Figure 31).



**Figure 31.**  
Satisfaction with the Erasmus stay by size of the city (%)



Source: own work.

The last analysed variable – the country of origin – clearly differentiates the level of satisfaction. Students from countries within the EU zone were much more satisfied with both their stay in Poland and educational aspects, compared to students from non-EU countries (Figure 32). It is to be explored what the determinants of the lower satisfaction of non-EU students are, and especially if this is related to the pandemic conditions in particular, or rather it is a general trend.



**Figure 32.**  
Satisfaction with the Erasmus stay by EU vs. non-EU students (%)



Source: own work.

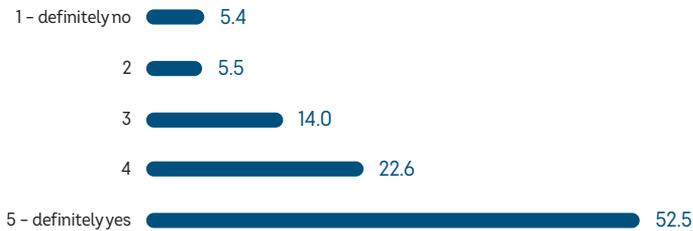
## Mobility during the pandemic – is it better than staying at home?

One of the most important indicators of satisfaction with the exchange under the Erasmus+ Programme is its recommendation to other people. The respondents were asked if they would recommend to take part in the Erasmus+ Programme the way they participated in it. The data shows that slightly more than half of the surveyed students would recommend such studies to their friends and other people. Every fifth respondent would rather recommend this form of studies. 11% of respondents would not recommend such studies to their friends. 14% of respondents indicated the middle point of the scale (Figure 33).



**Figure 33.**

Recommending the Erasmus+ exchange to other students (%)  
*Would you recommend taking part in the Erasmus+ Programme the way you participated in it to others?*



*Source: own work.*

The relationships between the socio-demographic characteristic of students and their recommendation of Erasmus studies to their friends and other people were analysed in detail. Gender, age, place of study and country of origin to a greater or lesser extent differentiate giving the recommendations. There are more female students than male who would recommend their studies to other people (the difference is over 12 percentage points). Among students studying in metropolises, more people are satisfied with their studies and thus give very positive recommendations (difference of 21 percentage points). Respondents from countries outside the EU more often expressed dissatisfaction with their studies and were not willing to recommend them to friends and other people.

Finally, students were also asked what advice they would give to people who are just about to start their university studies abroad, based on their own experience in this field. Among the surveyed students, slightly over 70% would advise people planning to go to study abroad soon to pursue their goal as planned, 15% of respondents would advise postponing their departure until the situation returns to normal. Next 11.6% indicated the option to start studying abroad in the form of virtual learning and delaying the trip. Less than 2% of the respondents would recommend completely abandoning

the planned studies abroad, and 1.2% would recommend replacing studies abroad with virtual learning. The data clearly shows that students, despite the risks associated with COVID-19, are convinced of the need to implement their plans and not to give up going abroad to study (Figure 34).



**Figure 34.**

Recommendation to other students in regard to future mobility (%)

*Based on your personal experience, what is the best decision for people who plan to carry out a study mobility in the coming months?*

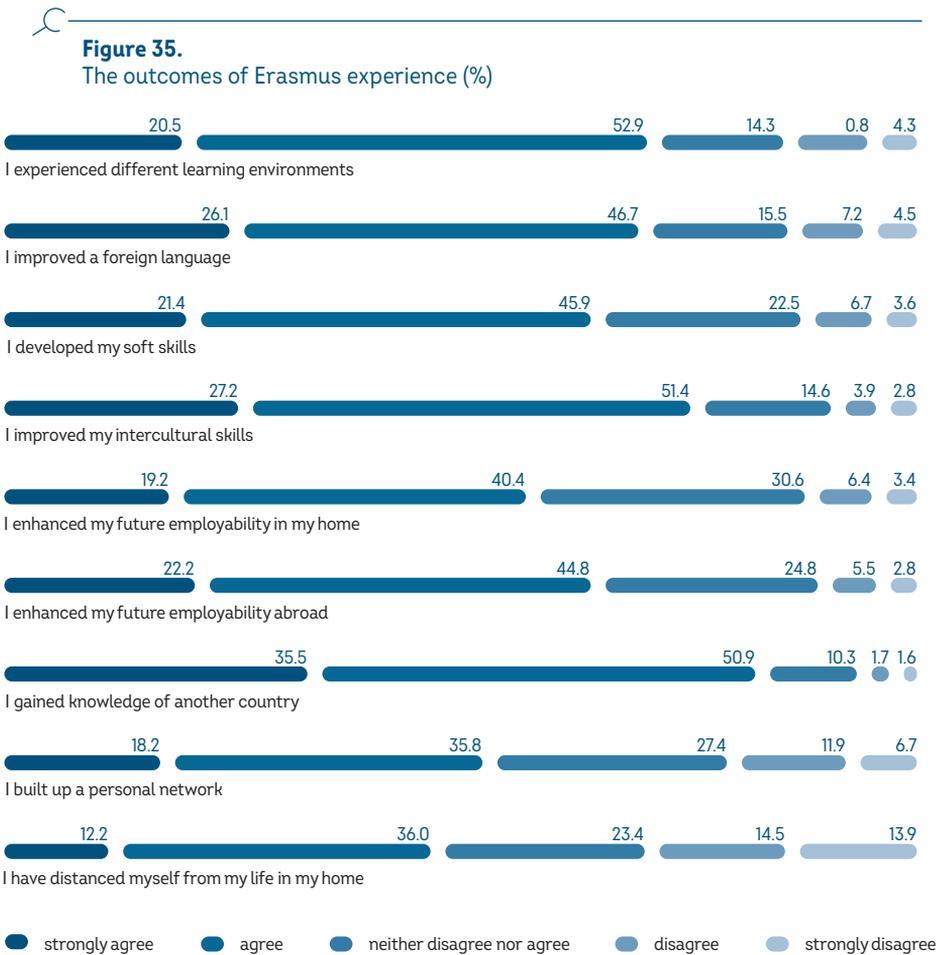


*Source: own work.*

### Outcomes of the study abroad

The students who go on Erasmus expect particular outcomes of their stay abroad. By definition, Erasmus+ is a project that allows students to build bridges between different cultures, nations and races. Carried out in various countries, it allows making acquaintances and friendships that are part of the social capital of individuals. It is also an institutional tool that strengthens identification with Europe and the European Union, as well as stirs professional mobility.

We asked students to evaluate the outcomes of their stay in Poland on a 5-point scale (Figure 35).



Source: own work.

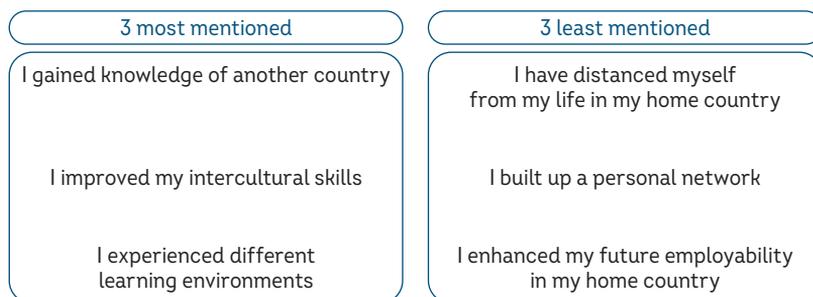
The data shows that the studies allowed the **students to gain knowledge and get to know the country to the greatest extent** (almost 90% of students agreed with this statement). As the second benefit, students indicated the **acquisition of intercultural skills** (78.6%). The third benefit was the **experience of different learning environments** (73.4%). As the least significant gain from the studies, the respondents indicated distancing themselves from living in their home country (less than 50% agreed with this statement). In fact, students in relation to the pandemic mentioned worrying about their close friends and family at home country. Some of them stayed at home and

chose virtual Erasmus. Also, due to the discussed pandemic conditions for social bonding, students were not able to build personal networks to a satisfactory degree (only 54% of respondents agreed they had such networks). Additionally, students were not so optimistic about the impact of their stay abroad on their employability, both in home country and abroad – here, many students were not sure of this outcome, which may as well be related to the unpredictability of the labour market situation.



**Figure 36.**

The most indicated and least indicated outcomes of Erasmus experience



*Source: own work.*

Only the statements with the greatest consent of the respondents were analysed in detail. These are: (1) gaining knowledge of another country (Poland), (2) gaining intercultural skills, (3) experiencing different learning environments.

The first most selected outcome of the Erasmus exchange is **gaining knowledge about another country**. The relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and individual dimensions of benefits perceived by students, which were brought by their studies in the Erasmus+ Programme, shows that some of the independent variables influence the beliefs selected for the analysis. Gender, level of studies and country of origin do not differentiate the belief that the studies allowed to gain knowledge about the country. The age of the respondents differentiates this belief – among the youngest respondents (22 years old and less) there is the highest percentage of students who believe that studying abroad allowed them to learn more about Poland as the country they chose for their studies (39% of them think so), while among the oldest students, respondents with this belief constitute less than 30%. The variable that differentiates this belief strongly is the place of study, with those studying in large cities or metropolises noticing this outcome more frequently.

The second most important benefit from studying abroad, according to the surveyed students, is **deepening of intercultural skills**. Studying in the Erasmus+ Programme is conducive to making friends with members of different nations and cultures, getting to know different religions, world views and lifestyles. In a globalised world, having the ability to recognise the cultural sources of human behaviour becomes extremely important, and even necessary in solving problems of people from different backgrounds. The analysis of the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and the belief in acquiring intercultural skills showed no significant relationships between gender, age, level of studies, country of origin and the studied variable. Only the place of study significantly differentiates the belief that intercultural skills were acquired through studying abroad. The respondents studying in provincial cities less frequently indicated that they acquired this skill than students studying in large university cities and metropolises. Students from metropolitan areas indicated that they acquired this important skill through studies almost twice as often as students from small towns. The difference in percentage points in the case of a definite disagreement with the statement: "I improved my intercultural skills" between students from the metropolis and students from provincial cities is almost 7 pp. Such a result is not surprising. Opportunities for making friends and observing the behaviour of representatives of other countries, cultures and religions in large cities are greater than in small ones. Research has confirmed this relationship.

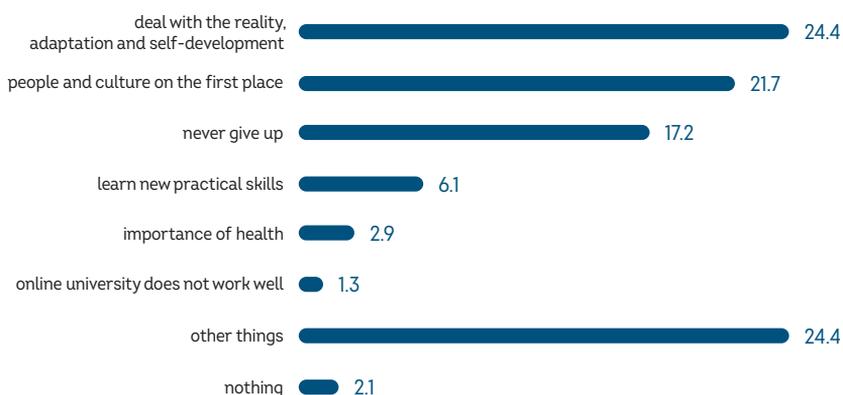
The third most important benefit from studying abroad was **the acquisition of experience of different learning environments**. Each country has its own specific way and its educational programmes. This difference already applies to the lowest levels of education. Until the signing of the Bologna Treaty, Poland had a uniform system of studies. It seems extremely important that the surveyed students indicate the experience of different learning environments as an important benefit of studying under the Erasmus+ Programme. The analysis of the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and the belief in the importance of this experience shows that gender does not differentiate this belief to a large extent. Women, slightly more than men agree to a large extent with the statement "I experienced different learning environments" (7.1 percentage points). This has to do with the type and nature of surveyed studies. Women are more likely to choose socio-humanities studies and are more sensitive to the importance of the learning environment. For men, who choose engineering and technical studies more often than women, this is less important. The level of studies, age and country of origin do not differentiate the analysed dependent variable. However, significant differences were noted for the place of study. Again, as in the case of the belief in acquiring intercultural experiences, students from metropolitan areas more

often considered experiencing different learning environments as a significant benefit of studying abroad (a difference of almost 8 percentage points). This result only confirms previous observations about the importance of the place of study for the perception of the benefits of participating in Erasmus+.

We were aware that the scales that are being used in the study of Erasmus students learning outcomes might not capture learning that takes place in difficult conditions of the pandemic. Additionally to the survey questions, students were asked to give an answer to an open question on what their Erasmus+ studies had taught them during the pandemic. They mostly emphasised the possibility of self-development, quick adaptation to new conditions, especially coping with life. Responses classified as “other” appeared frequently as well – they related to diverse observations of students in relation to e.g. differences between countries, assessments of the host country, or the inability to obtain assistance when needed. In fact, they indicated more in-depth reflection on intercultural differences. Every fifth student emphasised that the pandemic taught them to care for and appreciate establishing relationships with other people and creating – despite everything – good conditions for getting to know foreign culture and history. For 17% of respondents, the lesson from the Erasmus exchange was about fighting for dreams and facing all adversities. The last categories of responses dealt with learning practical skills (6%), the importance of health (3%) and bad experiences about university organisation (1%). Just a small group of student claimed they learnt nothing from their Erasmus stay (Figure 37).



**Figure 37.**  
The most important learning experiences of Erasmus students during the pandemic (%)



Source: own work.

## Intercultural learning and the pandemic

After examining the experiences of students, also in relation to their expectations, we shall look at the very important dimension of the stay abroad – intercultural learning. This aspect was considered as one of the most important outcomes of their stay abroad.

According to the results of the focus groups, there are two prevailing key dimensions of intercultural learning in the Erasmus experiences. They are closely linked to the previously discussed aspects of education and social life, with the first concerning language competence and the second dealing with multicultural experiences of friendships and bonds. To complement previous sections, we will now shed light on these criss-crossing issues.

As for the language as the medium of intercultural communication in the new environment, the interviewees made a clear distinction between learning the language of the host country (Polish) and mastering or improving their English fluency as a way to function in the globalised world. Starting with the latter, having classes in English was quite important, with a lot of focus placed on terminology of the discipline:

☺☺ *English, normally in my country, they do not really speak English really well. So this experience has helped me a lot in improving my speaking. And also [...] I have learnt more things and vocabulary.*

[W3, Lublin]

Unsurprisingly, the confidence in language usage depended more on everyday interactions with friends:

☺☺ *I am not the best English-speaker but I am comfortable with my English. Like I can sort of communicate myself. So the good part of the Erasmus is that I use English every day. So I am more used to it, I am more comfortable. Like I gain self-confidence, so that is nice.*

[W2, Lublin]

The interviewees observed that the fact they might have been “forced” to immerse themselves linguistically had the desired effect on learning:

☺☺ *In my country I knew that my English level was OK. And I was content with that because of all of the tests that I took before. But the thing is, like I was really anxious about me explaining myself in English.*

*So if I am not speaking on the phone or at a meeting with my boyfriend who is in another town, I am always speaking English. So for me it was really a great experience.*

[W1, Lublin]

Others, however, pointed out the typical problem of language groupings that made intercultural exchange – also linguistically – much more limited. This happened for those whose Erasmus circles were dominated by one or two national groups who stayed in their own bubble. Such experiences might lead to negative evaluations at the beginning:

*I wanted to improve my level of English and at the beginning, I met people from Turkey, from Spain, from many countries, and they started to talk with their language. It was hard for me to [follow] Spanish or English, or even Polish. It was like a little bit hard for me. But after it is ok. I have many friends from the last year with different countries.*

[W6, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

Making sure that English is spoken has two-sided benefits: everyone can feel included and it helps the interviewees reach the goal of gaining new confidence in English every day:

*[As for] negatives, the only thing is when group of people of same country meet, they are talking in their own language and I feel left out at that moment, but that gradually change, because we insisted on talking in English.*

[W2, Poznań]

In some cases, the cumulative effect of having people with specific backgrounds in their social circles during the pandemic altered the expectations of the Erasmus intercultural exchange and learning. This, however, is not pandemic-specific, but rather shows that – despite early objectives – language practices may deviate:

*In my group there are mostly Italian, or Spanish people. I am joking with some friends that when we come back to our home country, we will speak better Italian than Polish, because there are just so many people and I am really glad that I met them, just to have insight to different cultures. Even though it is sad to not meet as many Polish people but*

*it is still really good to have met others and we are such a diverse group and I think everybody learns from everyone.*

[W2, Łódź]

Here we arrive at the important point: learning Polish is exceptionally problematic. This seems to be more the case during the COVID-19 era. In this context, most interviewees expected to have a better knowledge of the local language than what they finally achieved.

*For me, I think I was speaking English language since I was a child. Official language in my country is English. So for that I would not say, it is normal for me. For Polish, very little. And for Turkish, yes, I used to have some interaction with my Turkish friends. But that has improved. That is the only advantage.*

[M1, Lublin]

*I think Polish is a very difficult language and I hoped that I would come back with higher level of Polish, but because of difficulties of the language and also the Erasmus bubble, that I have told you before, I have not learnt very much, that is the most negative aspect for me.*

[M2, Poznań]

This disappointment seems to be connected not only to limited social contact with Polish people and culture, but also to language instruction appearing severely maladapted to the online classroom setting:

*And with the Polish, I tried to attend a course but it was a total fail because for me, it was a really complicated language. Like I could not understand anything. And also the teacher was like teaching people who already know something about Polish. So it was really complicated to follow the instructions and that stuff. So I quit the course.*

[W3, Lublin]

*And when it comes to Polish, it is a disaster. [We] tried to join the course the university offered. Like to try to [...] to adapt better to Polish, but they did not care at all about us, the professors. We are slow learners with Polish because it is super different from our language, but they did not*

even try to understand us. They just left us behind and we did not understand something and we said “OK, we do not understand this. Can you repeat?”, they did not even just blink. They just did not ask us anymore in the last two hours that the class lasted. So we were like “OK, they do not care, we do not care either” and we quit the course.

[W2, Lublin]

The majority of the interviewees understood that to retain Polish, you would need to put much more effort. In that sense, Erasmus remained somewhat of a shallow way to get a bit familiar with the language and culture.

And as for Polish language, two months ago before I came here, I was really excited. So I downloaded Duolingo and started to learn the basic stuff. And so I know how to manage, like really the basic, basic stuff. But I did not want to participate in the Polish course because it is not, I mean, if you are not training or staying in Poland for so long, it is not helping in my opinion. But I can manage myself with the basics I know.

[W1, Lublin]

Sorry for incorrect pronunciation, maybe it is incorrect, I know some Polish phrases like *przepraszam*, *dzień dobry*, and *liczba* is numbers, right? And basic words.

[M2, Łódź]

Only those with pre-existing knowledge of Poland seemed to have an advantage. Moreover, a somewhat “forced” intercultural contact achieved by having mixed national setups of people sharing rooms at dorms seemed to work best. Two of the interviewees who reported better intercultural outcomes, stated:

I want to add something. I have my roommate, she is Polish. So, I think it is a very important thing to do and learn Polish language.

[W6, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

Coming to the language skill, obviously I learnt some new language which is Polish. I am even interested to do the second part of the language

*and I had to talk to my professor. Because it was interesting to know a new language.*

[W2, Poznań]

Moving on to intercultural peer activities within educational context – especially those animated by the Erasmus+ programme, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic seem to be even greater. On the whole, the interviewees believe that their intercultural learning was somewhat hindered. They spoke of bubbles formed under the specific and narrow premises of contacts that were “allowed” in the light of restrictions:

*Yes, of course [I learnt about cultures] but not than many cultures, because mostly I met here Turkish people, I do not know why, maybe in my group where I met some Turkish, and after that they had other friends and it is kind of, they are a bubble here. Yes, I would say I interacted with other culture and learnt about it. I'd like to meet other cultures too.*

[W3, Łódź]

A quotation below specifies how the Erasmus is now different from what it used to be: mostly because a lot of activities that local networks and animators used and battle-tested, stopped, such as orientation week, group trips. Such events are evident in the situations of getting people from different cultures together and talking, with the aim of fostering intercultural exchange:

*When I compare it to my previous Erasmus experience, when we once arrived there in my country, they held something called the International Week and they were already preparing us for this for a good period of time. [...] they had something like groups who were organising group trips for Erasmus students [...] So, these were the main opportunities when we had to get to know people like this a few minutes after each and every class [...] So unfortunately, all of these three conditions were not possible due to the pandemic here in Kraków.*

[W1, Kraków]

For many student-interviewees, social contact was the prerequisite for establishing a deeper understanding of the local culture:

SS *Just like I said. I think for me, it is the culture of other people, I would have to interact with them on the social level. So frankly speaking, I have not learnt much.*

[M1, Lublin]

SS *Here in the dorm, we are all from different nationalities. So I have learnt a lot about different cultures. [...] In my country, there are some issues with some cultures, so now that we have learnt more about them, we can now confront people who think about that. And also, like Polish culture, I do not really think I have learnt something because I did not have the opportunity. Like just with the grocery store, normal, basic life. But other than that, I could not learn anything. I mean, I wish I could have but I do not know. It is difficult.*

[W3, Lublin]

Conversely, those who were able to gather and actively spent time together in multicultural groups of other Erasmus students were seemingly happier with their overall intercultural experience. Once again, the proximity was an important factor and those living in student dorms had more chances to socialise in intercultural groups:

SS *I learnt a lot of things from different cultures, because friends in my dormitory, they are from a lot of different countries, we have Ukraine, Italy, Germany, Slovakia, Kazakhstan. So, I knew a lot of things about these countries, their cultures and language and I did the same with my language, I taught them some words.*

[M1, Poznań]

SS *I was able to explore the city and country and I just visited Warsaw, Kraków, and Łódź. It was actually fun. I was comfortable because you joined a group of friends, we were able to communicate a lot about different countries and with various experiences as everybody was talking in English. So, it was pretty much good.*

[W2, Poznań]

From a practical point of view and in an attempt to give some recommendation, it seems that a lot of challenges could have been resolved by being embedded in an international community which was - by default - doing practical things together. As one example, a lot of intercultural learning came down to food:

☺☺ *I feel like I learn a lot about the food culture because in the few meetings that I had with my new friends, we had a lot of dinners. So we had time to share about our foods and habits. And, as for the Polish culture, I can say that I gather some information but by doing like simple tasks. Like if I go to the supermarket, I can see how people react or how, even how our reception is in the dorm, like they interact with us. So I can grasp some of the behaviours that Polish people have.*

[W1, Lublin]

Learning about intercultural differences was, therefore, seemingly shallow, as demonstrated by the example driven from a classroom setting of a class trying to enhance or facilitate intercultural learning about food and culture online:

☺☺ *Yes, I have some classes about anthropology and we talked in class about different culture, for example, how the coffee is made in different cultures and about their traditions. So, it is very interesting for me because I am learning about all these new cultures and it is very interesting.*

[M2, Toruń/Zielona Góra]

The fact that they undergo Erasmus in the particular conditions of isolation caused by the pandemic might mean that their immersion in the local culture is severely limited. They rarely experience the factual culture shock and the factual cultural understanding and learning that comes from overcoming it. With shallower experiences, the interviewees sometimes showed to be slightly immature about intercultural setting and stereotypical in their thinking about cultural differences, in spite of spending a semester abroad:

☺☺ *So, I also like the Polish way of life, because people are serious and hardworking and they are a bit individualistic but they are good people and they can give a helping hand if you need it. I have visited some cities around Poland, the two I like most are Kraków and Toruń and I also could*

*... speak with people from my university that come from all the world [...] so that is what I think is the most positive aspect of intercultural learning.*  
[M2, Poznań]

Lack of opportunity to learn through experience and social contact with the locals resulted in rather negative evaluation on the whole:

*But the thing is that when it comes to Polish culture, it has been a mess, at least for me. [...] for example, I feel that everything is so cold. And like people behaviour mixes with the cool weather. So it is even worse. And also like, I have not had the chance to meet Polish people. And I feel like a [stranger] into Polish culture. I have only seen people like in the supermarket doing groceries, maybe in our dorm. But more than that – I did not.*

[W2, Lublin]

To sum up, it can be said that **intercultural learning was somewhat impeded during the COVID-19 pandemic**, especially when it came to the dynamics of the country of origin versus the country of study. For the most part, the participants did not feel like they learnt about Poland, Polish culture, people and language. On the plus side, despite the fact that many chances for international student gatherings and meet-ups were made impossible by the pandemic restrictions, the interviewees still managed to develop some bonds in the “Erasmus bubble”, albeit significantly smaller ones.

*Because we know our time is so short, we think the friendships are 10,000 more intense, than I think a regular friendship at home university would be. And we are all pretty sure that we will stay in contact for at least a few more years or the rest of our lives. Just because we had such an intensive time together. So, I am really glad that I got to meet them, from all over Europe.*

[W2, Łódź]

With the pandemic lasting long, some interviewees recognise that it is important to move forward nonetheless. In that case, they are open to intercultural learning through social contact with people from other countries, in a manner that is typical to standard Erasmus exchange experiences.

## Mobility value and the COVID-19 pandemic

It is important to look at mobility attitudes of students, as the pandemic may have an impact on how they perceive mobility in their educational paths and how they manage their mobility choices. Would pandemic limitations for mobility lead to devaluation of mobility within education career and life choices?

### Mobility capital of students

It is important to say that among the studied group there is a share of students who have gathered mobility capital through other stays abroad. 22% of respondents had lived abroad (i.e. in a country other than your country of birth) for longer than 3 months before participating in Erasmus (Figure 38).



**Figure 38.**

Former experience of living abroad before Erasmus+



Source: own work.

While for most of the survey respondents, the Erasmus study in Poland was their first time studying abroad, we also observe a number of those who do multiple periods abroad within their educational careers. For 23% of students, the Erasmus study in Poland was not their first time abroad for studies. Among those, 4% of students have already studied in a foreign country more than once (Figure 39).



**Figure 39.**

Previous experience of studying abroad

Is this your first time studying abroad?



Source: own work.

## Importance of mobility

If we look at students' attitudes towards mobility, we see that students represent a generation of young people that have a strong belief in importance of mobility for young people. 74% of students strongly agree that each young person should get a chance to live abroad and 15% rather agree – only a small share of respondents does not agree with this statement.

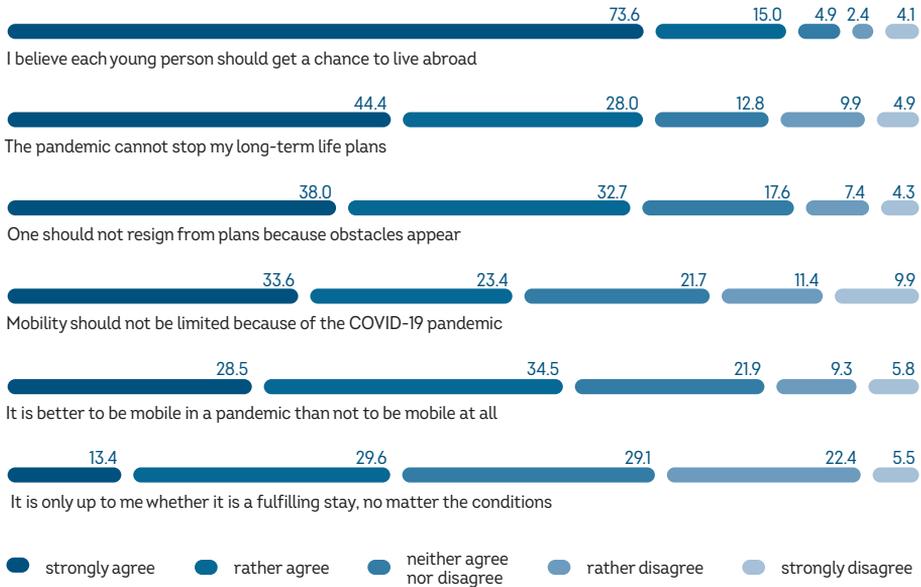
Importantly, students are very used to the right to be mobile and 57% of students agree – strongly or rather – that mobility should not be limited because of the COVID-19 pandemic. With 22% not having a stand on this matter, another one-fifth of respondents agrees that there might be some ban to mobility in epidemiological circumstances. This shows that the individual freedom of movement is more important for most students than aims of ceasing the pandemic.

A similar number of respondents agrees that mobility in the pandemic conditions is better than no mobility – with 28.5% of students strongly agreeing that it is better to be mobile in a pandemic than not to be mobile at all and 34.5% rather agreeing (together 63%).

In fact, students do not want to adjust their plans to the conditions of pandemic. About three-fourths state that the pandemic cannot stop their long-term plans. But the students do not agree so much with their impact on the quality of stay abroad – here, they see more the impact of external conditions of the pandemic. 13% strongly agree that it is up to them whether it is a fulfilling stay, and 30% rather agree with that. Still, quite a share of students does not agree with this statement, seeing external conditions as important for their study abroad experience (Figure 40).



**Figure 40.**  
Attitudes towards mobility (%)

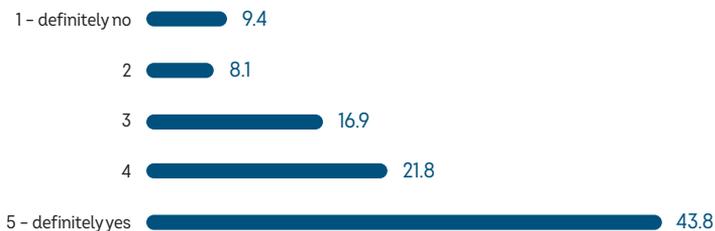


Source: own work.

The results strongly indicate that the pandemic condition does not demotivate students to take part in learning mobility. Most of the students would still consider applying for another stay abroad within Erasmus+ or another programme in the future even if the pandemic continues – 44% definitely yes and 22% rather yes. Less than 20% would not consider repeating mobility experience in enduring pandemic conditions. It is important though to remember that these are opinions of those who actually went on Erasmus in the pandemic, while quite a share of students resigned (Figure 41).



**Figure 41.**  
Consideration of applying for another stay abroad (%)  
*Would you consider applying for another stay abroad, even if the pandemic continues?*



Source: own work.

Women and students from European Union countries, especially the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree students, are more willing than others to apply for the possibility of studying abroad again, even in the event of a pandemic. The larger the city in which they studied, the more willing students are to leave again.

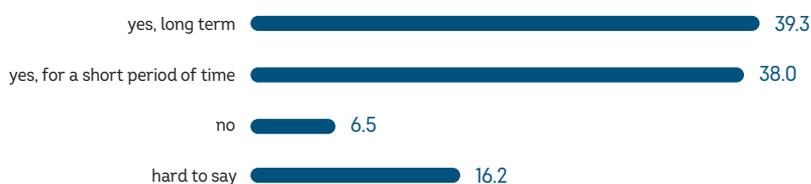
Also, the students plan future mobilities after studies as well. 39% of them would like to live abroad for longer period of time and 38% would consider moving for shorter period of time. With 16% of students not yet being sure about their migration plans, only 6.5% answered negatively to mobility plans (Figure 42).



**Figure 42.**

Consideration of moving to a foreign country after studies (%)

*Would you consider moving to a foreign country after your studies?*



*Source: own work.*

There are no significant differences in these plans by gender, level of study, or place of origin. The size of the city in which the studies were conducted seems to have some influence on further plans. Those who studied in metropolises have more specific plans (fewer people found it difficult to say what they would consider for the future). They were more willing than other students to declare a long stay abroad after their studies. Students from non-metropolitan cities, if they declared their willingness to go abroad, it would rather be for a short time.

### Reflecting on future mobilities

The questions about future pathways and mobility plans were included in focus group interviews, but due to the time constraints they were tackled in three discussions out of 5. However, it is possible to deduce some themes about the Erasmus as a trigger for future mobility, as well as educational and career ambitions. More often than not, even the pandemic-enduring experience of Erasmus had been seen as having positive effects on planning or reflecting on one's choices and paths. In many stories, being abroad (or away) helped to identify true dreams, as well as weaknesses or barriers to achieving those:


*I want to change my Bachelor in engineering space or aircraft, or machine. So, therefore I want to apply for a place in New York University, but I need to improve my IELTS and this is what University of Łódź told me, because I speak, I cannot say very well, but I try to learn. So, part of future may be SpaceX Elon Musk and I want to be a member of this party and change space.*

[M1, Łódź]


*This will be my last semester after this Erasmus, so I have plan for my internship and I am staying long here, so that is one of the best opportunities and I do not think anything can affect my vision of the future, because I really love the way business is starting in Europe, much better than in my country.*

[W2, Poznań]

Getting good educational advice was a general benefit underlined, which criss-crosses with the positive outlook on educational gains on the whole (as discussed in the previous section). Even from the limited data, we can judge that the majority of the Erasmus students interviewed have caught the “mobility bug” and wished to pursue further opportunities linked to international exposure and exchange:


*Since I am finishing my Bachelor degree this semester, I consider applying again for Erasmus, I will be a kind of experienced in this project because I already have Erasmus experience, so I would like to have at least two more. Probably I would choose to work in one of the European countries.*

[W3, Łódź]


*I will go back to my country because now I am in my Bachelor part of studies. But as Erasmus side-effect I will name it that way I really want my Master degree to be in another country.*

[W1, Lublin]


*For me, after Erasmus actually I might come back for Erasmus but for internship. And for that one I am planning to visit a different country, although European country. And after my studies or my Master's, I am looking at Canada. Canada because I think I have experienced a little*

*of Europe, I have got that of Africa and a little of Asia which is Turkey. I was thinking, having the American or the Canadian life would probably be OK for me.*

[M1, Lublin]

For some participants, particularly those for whom travelling or internationalisation were not their main goals of life, Erasmus was a transformative experience:

*SS But the way that the Erasmus Programme has affected my future career is that previously I was a bit suspicious about working abroad but after being in the Erasmus+ Programme, I think I would go, if any offer appears, so I would go and work abroad at any time of my life.*

[M2, Poznań]

Such stories seem less affected by the pandemic, but differentiated by age and country of origin. Especially those nearing graduation and coming from EU member states, had a pronounced pan-European identity. The interviewees connected – or sometimes even equated – mobility with the freedom of movement and expanded scope of rights and citizen privileges, which in turn contributed to their envisioned choices in studying and work:

*SS The first years I want to pursue a job outside my country, just because I really love how free you are to just choose a country that you want to study and work. So, after coming here, I do not just think about going to Belgium or France, but maybe one of the Eastern European countries, since I learnt to love them, or at least Poland. And then also I would love to work for European Union at some point, it was always on my mind since I was 12, or 13 years. And here I have one subject which was European project management and I absolutely loved it and that was one of the subjects that influenced me long-term, also regarding my career options, so let us see. But I just want to look at some options.*

[W2, Łódź]

Therefore, it can be observed that mobility – understood as something that is available to the representatives of the Erasmus generation – was commonly a very important strategy that helped make sure that one ends up in the desired place – both geographically, but also in relation to one's professional career.

So, my plan to continue travel, continue going abroad. During this fall I will go to America for my Master's degree and after that back to my country to finish it. But if I have the opportunity to work abroad maybe in Europe or North America, I will definitely accept it. And the pandemic does not really impact my vision because it wasn't really affected by it, I just saw that there will be more and more conflict in the next years, economics and social conflict that we will need to fight against it and find a solution.

[M1, Poznań]

The focus group interviews were conducted when COVID-19 was winding down, thus it might have alleviated some of its perceived impact. On the one hand, the students could even see some opportunities – around public health or digitalisation – that the pandemic illuminated and integrated into their educational and professional paths, as the quote above shows. On the other hand, the interviewees – aware of the warmer season and vaccination efforts – often skipped over its implications for their past, current and future choices. Since they did the Erasmus during the pandemic, they do not feel they should change their plans in relation to future mobility being interjected by possible subsequent waves of the virus-spread spikes:

So, I would for sure do study abroad, because I love travelling and I think spending time in different countries, while you study is just a perfect mix. I am actually applying at the moment for Master's degree with integrated stay abroad and if I am not getting into this one, I will for sure also do an Erasmus during my Masters. For me, it is sure that if I do a Master, that I also want to stay abroad and I think I would like to do it in Spain, or in Italy, just something new.

[W1, Poznań]

In sum, it might be argued **that the effect of the pandemic on future mobility is less significant than expected**. The reasons seem two-fold. First, the interviewees have a “hunger” to fulfil more goals with future mobility in somewhat of a compensatory trend that says that being mobile again without a pandemic might be even better:

” I want to end up this Erasmus travelling and trying to live behind COVID. And then I will come back because I am on my last year of studies. So I need to finish it. And I would like to go outside again and live more abroad and study. So I will wait until Master’s maybe or try to find some scholarship. I for sure would love to do research and not in my country. [...] So living abroad will be really nice for me.  
[W2, Lublin]

Second, the fact that they moved to a foreign country and studied abroad in spite of the global crisis, might be a trigger for being more certain about forging one’s own biography. The interviewees spoke of courage and confidence in making future choices:

” Well, for me, like I had the Erasmus experience in the pandemic. So now I am like more brave when it comes to another experience. Like I want to return from then. So that is why I applied for an Erasmus in the next semester in Lithuania. And also, the pandemic kind of changed my base because now I know that I have to work a little bit harder. And even with this Erasmus experience, I mean, for my education, I feel like I am a little bit lower than I was before. So maybe it will be a delay but also I think and I really hope that I can overcome this, even if I take one year or two extra.  
[W1, Lublin]

From a broader perspective, we can see that there are profound messages in how younger generations are socialised, with the messages – both at home and in the educational settings – underlining that international experience is important for self-development and one’s future:

” I would like to go again abroad. I do not know where but I do not know if I will be able to do that. That is why I chose going on here. But my parents told me that it is a good idea to travel around when you are studying so you can discover new things and you can improve your self-confidence also.  
[W3, Lublin]

## Students' attitudes

One of the assumptions made in the project was that there is a relationship between personality features and the various dimensions of Erasmus+ studies. In general, the decision to go to study abroad applies to people who are more curious about the world, who like challenges and new experiences. People who do not like changes, do not show interest in getting to know new places and people and do not want new experiences, will rather stay in their country and undertake studies in places located close to their place of residence. We assume that Erasmus students constitute a specific category of young people. We decided that it is worth examining their mobility attitudes (what we described in the previous chapter), sense of self-efficacy and the level of fear of COVID-19. In our opinion, these variables will constitute good characteristics of the surveyed students and can be used as variables explaining behaviour and attitudes regarding other aspects of their stay.

### Self-efficacy – managing despite the pandemic

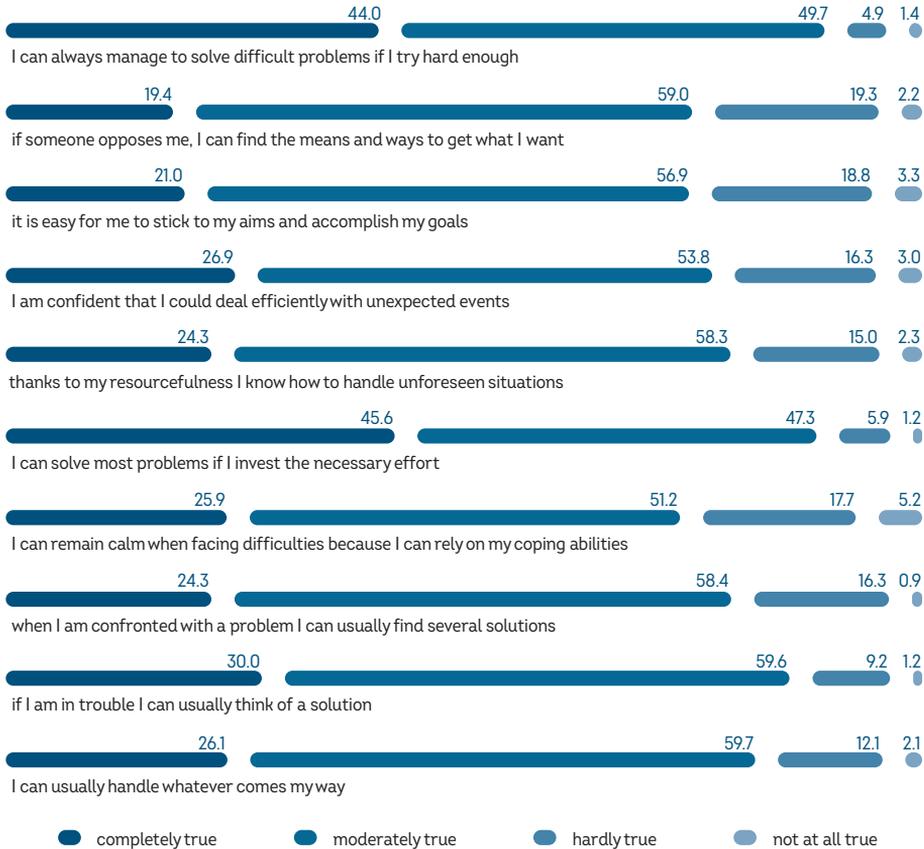
The sense of self-efficacy is a category that has a well-established position in both psychology and sociology and is understood similarly, and although subject to empirical research, it is not so unambiguous. The sense of self-efficacy, i.e. the feeling of influencing what is happening around us, may have different levels in different areas of our activity. One can have a sense of subjectivity in the family sphere, but not in the professional sphere. Or vice versa. The activity controlled by external factors is considered the opposite of subjective actions. Such a situation most often occurs in a situation of passivity, submission, helplessness or dependence of an individual.

To study agency understood in this way, in the case of Erasmus students in Poland, the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES) was used. It refers to the concept of expectations and the concept of perceived self-efficacy formulated by Bandura (1977; 1997). The scale consists of 10 items. It was prepared in German in 1992 and translated into English the following year. The scale captures the strength of an individual's general beliefs that express their confidence in coping with difficult situations and obstacles (Schwarzer 1993). In general, it is important to know how to influence your own life, solve problems and achieve goals.

The data shows that the surveyed students are rather highly empowered and have a high sense of self-efficacy. The presented frequencies and means, as well as standard deviation, show that the respondents do not have any major problems and can find a solution in situations when problems appear. They declare to be worse at sticking to their goals and handling unexpected situations (Figure 43).



**Figure 43.**  
Students' self-efficacy (%)



Source: own work.

All surveyed students who obtained a result above average were classified as people with a high level of self-agency (high level of subjectivity). There were 382 of them in the studied sample, which constitutes 42% of valid answers. All students who obtained a result below the average in the study were classified as people with a low level of self-efficacy. There were 518 such students, which constitutes 58% of valid answers. This result shows that more than half of the surveyed students are people who admit to having certain problems related to solving difficult situations (Figure 44).



**Figure 44.**  
Erasmus students by self-efficacy level  
*Self-efficacy among students*

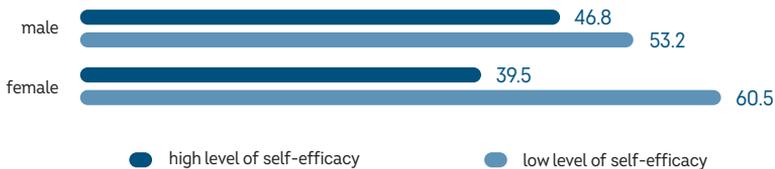


*Source: own work.*

The relationships between the sense of self-efficacy and socio-demographic characteristics were analysed, assuming that gender, age, level of studies, place of study, as well as origin from an EU country or outside of it, may differentiate the examined personality dimension. The fact of coming from EU or not has no impact on the sense of self-efficacy. The data shows that women more often than men admit to being less effective. Almost 50% of men declare higher self-efficacy, while 40% of women declared so (Figure 45).



**Figure 45.**  
Erasmus students self-efficacy level by gender (%)

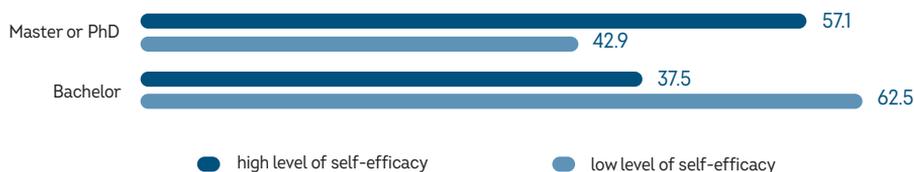


*Source: own work.*

Data analysis shows that the level of study significantly differentiates the sense of self-efficacy. The difference between first-cycle (BA) and second-cycle (MA or PhD) students is almost 20 percentage points, which means that older, more experienced students, who are at a higher level of study, are more convinced of their effectiveness than students of the 1<sup>st</sup> degree. The explanation seems to be obvious. Students enter MA studies after completing the first cycle of studies. Their self-confidence, self-esteem and conviction about their competencies are higher than among students starting their adventure with studies, which translates into a higher sense of self-efficacy (Figure 46)



**Figure 46.**  
Erasmus students' self-efficacy level by level of study (%)

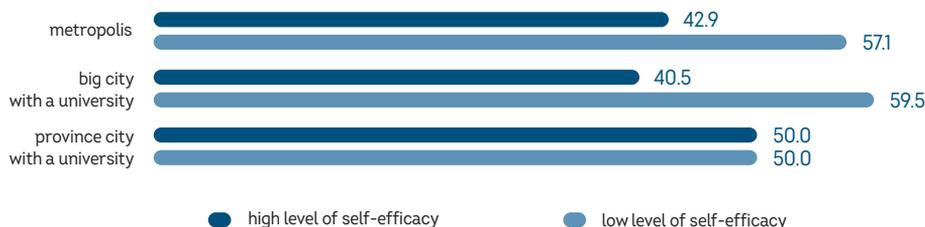


Source: own work.

The place of study in Poland is another independent variable that was analysed as a feature explaining the level of effectiveness. The quantitative data shows that students studying in provincial cities obtained a higher position on the scale of their effectiveness than students studying in university cities or metropolises (Figure 47).



**Figure 47.**  
Erasmus students self-efficacy level by city of stay in Poland (%)



Source: own work.

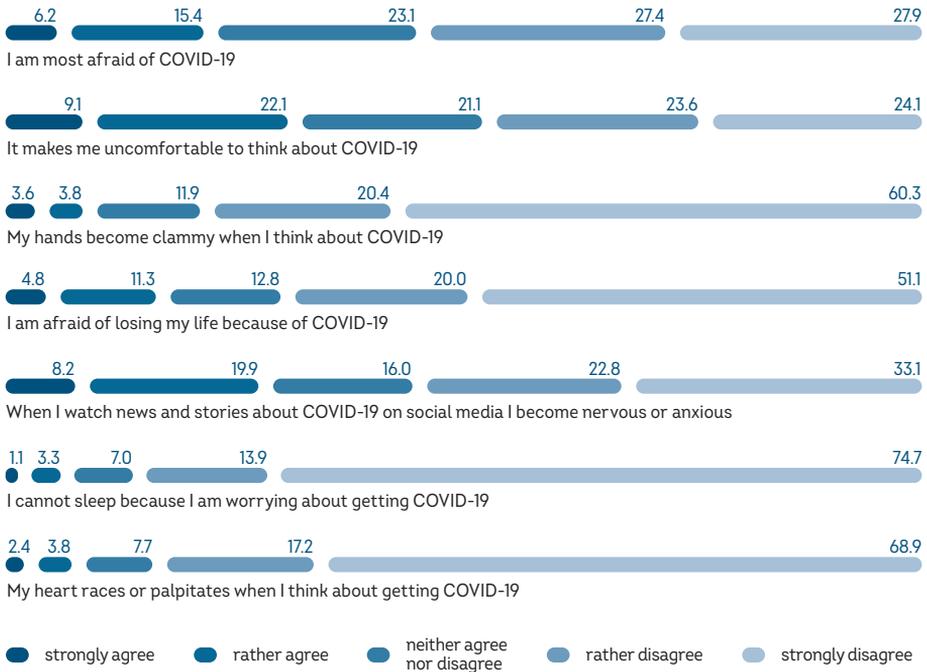
## The Fear of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic, as a medical phenomenon (disease) and as a social phenomenon (the necessity to use restrictions in social contacts, remote education, isolation, quarantine, etc.) and, above all, as a mass phenomenon that affected people from all over the world, triggered various types of behaviour, attitudes, but also fears. They can be existential fears, but also very specific fears about one's health and/or the health of the family. Therefore, we asked Erasmus students about their attitudes towards COVID-19.

The students indicated their level of agreement with the statements using a five-item Likert-type scale. Answers included "strongly disagree", "disagree", "neutral", "agree" and "strongly agree". The minimum score possible for each question is 1, and the maximum is 5. A total score could be calculated by adding up each item score (ranged from 7 to 35) – (Figure 48).



**Figure 48.**  
Erasmus students' attitudes towards COVID-19 (%)  
*Fear of COVID-19*



*Source: own work.*

The level of fear resulting from the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is relatively high. The greatest consent to the statements making up the anxiety scale was for the following: "It makes me uncomfortable to think about COVID-19", "When I watch news and stories about COVID-19 on social media, I become nervous or anxious", "I am most afraid of COVID-19". It can be assumed that the media information about the coronavirus and the very thinking about COVID-19 generate fears, however, the fear of losing health or life does not apply to the respondents. Rather, they do not, or rarely experience, physical symptoms of anxiety such as trembling and sweating of the hands, rapid heartbeat or insomnia.

The mean and standard deviation allowed to distinguish two types of attitudes towards COVID-19. All those who scored above average were classified as having a high level of COVID-19 anxiety. Those who scored below the average were classified as having a low level of fear of the virus.

The analysis of data on anxiety related to the pandemic showed that **among the surveyed students almost 60% have a low level of fear, and 40% have a high level of fear** (Figure 49).



**Figure 49.**

The level of Erasmus students' fear of COVID-19



*Source: own work.*

It is important to analyse the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics and the level of fear of COVID-19. The data shows that there are slightly more students from the EU area with a low level of COVID-19 fear than students from outside this area (roughly 14 percentage points), and fewer people with a high level of anxiety (difference less than six percentage points). This difference may result from the sense of security of students from the EU countries and the conviction that the authorities of these countries will be able to cope with the actions in the event of a threat. Among students from countries outside the EU, there are inhabitants of economically underdeveloped regions, and therefore their concerns for their safety may be greater.

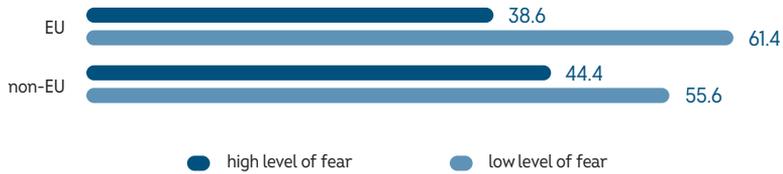
Gender slightly differentiates attitudes towards COVID-19, although slightly higher levels of anxiety have been reported among women. Among men, there were more students with low levels of anxiety. This difference between men's and women's anxiety can be explained culturally and by reference to stereotypes. It is not proper for men to admit that they are afraid because it indicates their weakness or lack of character. However, this would require reference to other data, including qualitative ones.

The data shows that the second-cycle students, and thus older students, experienced less anxiety related to COVID-19 than the first-cycle (undergraduate) and younger students.

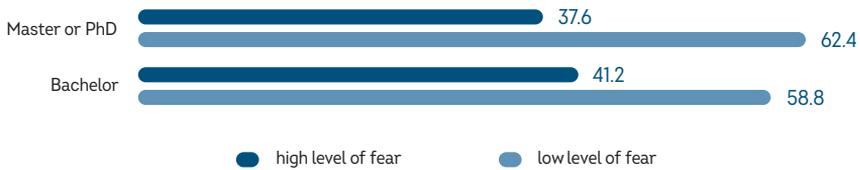
The last variable that was taken into account when trying to explain the characteristics influencing attitudes towards COVID-19 was the place of study in Poland. The data shows that students studying in metropolises (in Warsaw, Kraków, Poznań and Wrocław) found themselves on the lower levels of the anxiety scale. There were many people among them who do not at all or rarely feel the fear of pandemic (Figure 50).

**Figure 50.**

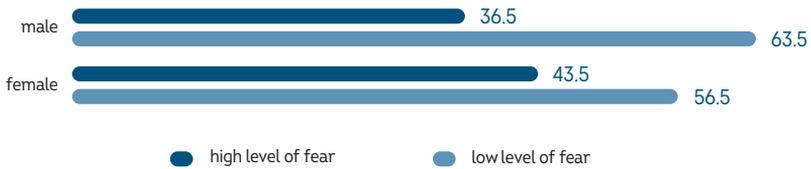
The level of Erasmus students' fear of COVID-19 by country of origin (%)

*Source: own work.***Figure 51.**

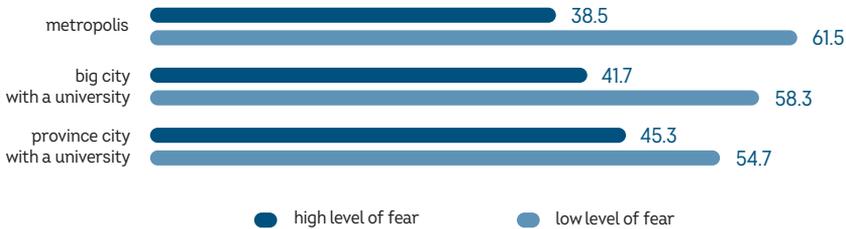
The level of Erasmus students' fear of COVID-19 by level of study (%)

*Source: own work.***Figure 52.**

The level of Erasmus students' fear of COVID-19 by gender (%)

*Source: own work.***Figure 53.**

The level of Erasmus students' fear of COVID-19 by city of stay in Poland (%)

*Source: own work.*



# RESULTS

Part II: Erasmus in the pandemic  
from teachers' perspective



## International didactics during the pandemic

### General remarks

International didactics during the pandemic period has undergone a fundamental change. The restrictions and limitations introduced in Poland meant that classes in both the summer semester 2019/2020 and the winter semester 2020/2021 were predominantly conducted with online methods. The main difference between the two semesters concerned the way in which e-learning was introduced – the summer semester 2019/2020 was marked with an unexpected change of situation, whereas the winter semester 2020/2021 was planned to be solely online. In both semesters, teachers and students met in-person to participate in just one or two meetings at the start of the semester, after which the courses went online. The semesters differed in terms of the attitudes of the international students. In the summer semester the vast majority of students were already in Poland, and after the pandemic was announced, their decisions to continue with the student exchange were threefold: (1) they decided to stay and continue their studies in Poland, (2) they decided to return to their home country but continue their studies in Poland remotely, (3) they decided to return to their home country and discontinue their studies in Poland. As ESN research shows, in the first wave of the pandemic, most Erasmus students decided to stay in a destination (42%) or return home (40%) – (Gabriels and Benke-Aberg 2020). In the summer semester, students had the opportunity to pursue the Erasmus+ Programme, however, realising that the pandemic conditions would endure, some of them decided to fly to Poland (as shown by the conducted survey – 79%), a share spent part of the semester in Poland and part in their home country (about 13%) and some to pursue the programme while remaining in their mother country (about 8%). In practice, the online Erasmus groups at the universities consisted of students staying in Poland as well as in their home countries.

In the light of further discussion in this part of the report, it is important to mention that organisational aspects of Erasmus classes can vary greatly depending on a university. Usually, Erasmus students learn within the framework of three types of classes: (1) Erasmus-only groups (large or medium-size), (2) international groups (Erasmus students combined with other foreign students in the frame of different international exchange programmes), and (3) Polish and Erasmus mixed together (and sometimes other international) students (these courses are sometimes obligatory for Polish students because Polish universities promote English language tutoring for the Polish students). The shape of a valid solution is important from the teachers' point of view because of the complex system of accounting the working hours. Sometimes an hourly conversion factor favouring the classes taught in English is applied, also depending on the number of persons subscribed, often combined with the innovativeness/repeatability of the subject.

Here, from the formal point of view, the presence of Erasmus students is irrelevant, since the classes are taught in English anyway, both to other foreign students, but also to the Poles.

In general, an obvious effect of the pandemic was a noticeable drop in the number of students choosing to participate in the Erasmus+ Programme. The interviewed lecturers overwhelmingly indicated a decrease in the number of participants in their regular classes, ranging from one-half to one-third compared to the pre-pandemic period. This is illustrated by the following statements:

☺☺ *This year we are seeing the impact of the pandemic and I had 17 students in my class so it is substantially less than I used to have, actually one-third less compared to the number of students I used to teach before the pandemic so definitely there is a noticeable change.*  
[R1]

☺☺ *I had 16-17 students in the previous semester, previously there were more, maybe 25-30 students.*  
[R5]

Academic teachers were asked about the differences between the two pandemic semesters. Respondents who had classes in both pandemic semesters indicated that the summer semester 2019/2020, despite technical problems, was easier for integration. Most students had already arrived in Poland and had the opportunity to get to know each other during the first few in-person/face-to-face classes. There were also better organised and motivated Informal groups, which often had their own leaders, and the exchange of information between them was more efficient. Social contact constituted the basis for online communication. As one respondent noted:

☺☺ *This year a strange thing happened, this was the first time we have seen something like this when students had literally no contact with each other [...] there was no alpha male in the heart who could organise the group, mobilise them to work harder [...] they noticed that the restrictions are becoming less strict and we lost an opportunity to control the progress, they definitely lost momentum and started to lag behind and did not perform as well as they would if it were not for the pandemic.*  
[R10]

With regard to other differences between the two semesters, respondents pointed to the technological and organisational aspects, related to improved teaching opportunities in the winter semester, which translated into more intensive and regular contact. In the winter semester 2020/2021 many technological barriers were eliminated, the quality of the connections was improved, and also the teachers themselves became more proficient with using platforms such as MS Teams. However, it seems that the improved technical possibilities did not translate into higher quality of teaching. The respondents complained about lower quality of contact, fewer possibilities to work individually with students, lack of provision of assistance, impossibility of correcting errors on the spot, as well as lower level of student motivation, worse learning results, fatigue and burn-out caused by online teaching:


*My friend called the first semester a hotch-potch and the other one “torpor”, I think these are very accurate descriptions because with this hotch-potche everything was new and somehow [...] but today we are much more familiar with all those techniques, as familiar as we could be, I would say, but this “torpor” it is like giving up, I think in the first semester we were yearning for the old days before the pandemic but we did not know when it would end but today perhaps no one thinks like this anymore.*

[R2]


*These days teaching goes much smoother from the technological perspective, it is easier because we have access to different solutions. This is a good thing. But [...] I will also have to refer to the students' attitudes, and I observe a dramatic change, for the words. In my opinion the contribution and commitment of students have been reduced to the absolute minimum, everything we do is reduced to very simple tasks and assignments, we are using very simplified resources which do not resemble real scientific content. We are choosing the path of the least resistance.*

[R4]

### Language level

The second issue mentioned in the interviews in the context of international didactics was the level of fluency of the language (in this case it was most often English) of foreign students. The issue of the fluency of English is not a problem which concerns only the pandemic period, however, as the statements of the respondents show, there were

additional factors which made communication difficult as a result of online teaching. The main problem was the lack of contact between students. There was no social and educational contact between them, thus, there was no pressure to use English. The opinions of the respondents were divided in this respect, as there were individual statements in which the lecturers indicated a high level of "linguistic eloquence", no fear of speaking in a foreign language or no language barrier in communicating with students. However, most of the academic teachers pointed to large variations in language skills of the students, which can be attributed to their country of origin and the quality of language education in their home countries. The best, in terms of language, are – in opinions of the teachers – students from the Nordic countries, Germany and those from the former Soviet Bloc countries (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, Bulgaria, Romania). Less skilled, in the opinion of teachers, are the representatives of southern European countries such as: France, Italy, Spain, although their language level can be described as communicative. The weakest English language skills are demonstrated by the students from Turkey, Portugal and China. This problem is probably conditioned by the differences in the educational systems of individual countries and the importance attached to the learning of foreign languages. The differences in this respect are very big – from persons who speak the language fluently to those who have no command of English whatsoever.

*They are doing pretty good, from my observations I notice that they are improving year by year, their skills are increasing as far as the command of the English language is concerned, I hardly ever get students who have poor English language skills [...] so all you know, I do not see a problem, they are doing really well.*

[R6]

*I would assess the language proficiency as quite good if we can talk about something like language proficiency, what I mean is that they are not afraid to speak out.*

[R2]

*Not very good, it is usually B1, sometimes far stretched, it is actually not a big issue because as the course continues they seem to be improving, but the lack of personal touch is clearly visible.*

[R10]

As mentioned before, there was also a communication problem before the pandemic, but some students decided to participate in the exchange in order to improve their language skills – in the student survey, it was the second most important motivation for going for Erasmus. Going to a foreign country means speaking a foreign language – local one or English, which in turn has a positive impact on the language level. During the pandemic, the main problem was the lack of international social contacts, group work in mixed teams or going out to restaurants, pubs and sightseeing. All these activities provide opportunities to use English in practice:

*SS I found teaching in English more challenging when in class than in online education I believe it is because you need different language skills to teach online than in a traditional classroom. In classes you need to use a lot of language which is not associated with the subject matter, you need to organise students, give commands etc., so teaching online is quite challenging, in the online classes the opportunities for personal communication are narrow down and there is less opportunity to build social relationships.*

[R4]

### Online teaching methods – the forms and quality

The transition to online teaching mostly meant using the MS Teams platform for class meetings and tasks, without any physical meetings. The application of a single platform for communication was a case especially in the winter semester 2020/2021. In the summer semester 2019/2020 there was more freedom in the choice of online teaching platforms and tools (e.g. Zoom, Google, Skype, Moodle). In the first pandemic semester, classes were not always interactive. Some classes were conducted by means of sending materials to be worked on, homework assignments, chat discussions. This was possible due to the lack of centralised coordination from the universities' management on how to conduct classes, or due to technical possibilities and skills. Certain recommendations were usually binding, but there was a greater degree of freedom in the choice of communication tools, while in the second semester one platform was indicated as obligatory for all the courses:

*SS The university left the choice of the platform up to the lecturers. At the beginning, for over a month we also collected declarations from students on whether they would be able to participate in the online classes. [...] our initial communication was through the Moodle platform, as it was the simplest access channel. Later, we used different platforms.*

*We communicated with students for example using Zoom last semester. But now all classes are held on MS Teams. Because it was also an indication of the university that all classes are held using this form of contact.*

[R8]

By no means, more flexibility was observed as far as didactic methods are concerned, during both semesters. The selection of didactic methods was related to the subject taught, the type of classes and the level of applicability. For this purpose, the academic teachers used various sources – from films created by themselves, through films available on the YouTube platform, to the use of virtual resources of various public institutions. The following tools were used during the classes: multimedia presentations, Word and PDF documents, interactive tools such as whiteboard, jamboard and shared documents. Some respondents, however, purposefully gave up the use of technology and interactive tools. The mode of work of the students also changed since the pandemic and implementation of online methods, as they more often performed individual than group tasks. The biggest problem with online these substitutes remained elusive. The emotions of participating in “live” culture cannot be easily substituted for.

*☺☺ Participation in culture had to be replaced by other forms. And here we provided students with access to multimedia materials, to various virtual tours of Polish museums. We gave them access to films with subscriptions and captions in English. We provided access to various online cultural events, which were also made available free of charge on platforms.*

[R8]

It is difficult to say whether the methodology of the classes with Erasmus students differed significantly from other online classes. Although, any differences or variations may be explained by a more interactive approach to teaching practices used during Erasmus classes. The most important method for the lecturers was academic discussion. In their statements, the teachers stressed the importance of exchanging international experiences. In respondents' opinion the exchange of experience is fundamental to the teaching practice of Erasmus students. To achieve that student activity is needed. The student activity was the biggest challenge of the online classes. As the respondents indicated, they had great difficulty in engaging students. The lack of physical contact and presence in a shared space had a disheartening effect on students:

 *I think I use similar methods to those I used before the pandemic, but I try to put emphasis on [...] Generally, what I said at the beginning, that discussion is very important for me, so that we can exchange experiences [...] This interactivity between me and the students is certainly less, especially that I do not see them, they only sometimes reveal themselves, but it is more difficult to enforce some information, they prefer not to speak and listen than to participate actively.*

[R3]

Another problem highlighted during our research was lowering of teaching standards, connected, on the one hand, with the use of less and less professional sources during online classes and, on the other hand, with students' expectations. The Erasmus students sometimes expect a more concessional approach from teachers than, for example, foreign students coming to Poland for their entire studies. It was pointed out in the interviews that Erasmus students have a different motivation. Acquiring knowledge is not always a priority for them. This translates into their attitudes – they pay less attention to classes, have higher absence rates. The effects are reflected in their grades.

 *For me, however, it is one of the first observations that an Erasmus student is a completely different student from a full-time student. [...] sometimes I have even encountered such a demanding attitude, [...] that they should be treated on different terms, obviously more liberally for them. Well, because this is in general a state of mind, something more than the process of studying. I think that this is quite common in their attitude and it translates into the fact that they put less effort into classes, they are less, less obligatory, absolutely the attendance is worse.*

[R4]

The teachers were also asked whether or not virtual mobility brought in any new opportunities, solutions in the field of teaching. Here, the keyword, repeating in various forms, was “tools”. Each of the interviewees emphasised that the period of limited traditional teaching has enforced, in a certain way, efforts to improve command of the aids for remote teaching, and this knowledge will stay with us forever. Perhaps this is a generational experience, which, also in the long run, made it possible for many teachers to test, and sometimes to refute, myths related to the difficulties in the so-called e-learning (interestingly, this word is practically never used in the discourse in the context of distance teaching in the present

situation). This issue involves the experience of working with students from the Erasmus+ Programme, but also it is being discussed widely in the context of the comprehensive experience of distance or hybrid teaching during the pandemic period.

The respondents pointed out that they had familiarised themselves with remote communication tools used in didactic activities, such as MS Teams, or the Moodle platform, quite well, so that they would use some of their abilities also after the restrictions are lifted. In this context, they mentioned forums, knowledge databases – repositories, chats (but not online exams, which entail a big problem related to mutual trust). They also show the logistic and functional advantage of using such tools:

☺☺ *So for example if I have some classes that I have to make up for, we can meet online. For example when I go abroad to attend the conference, now I do not have to call my classes off, I can run the class online from where I am staying at.*

[R1]

The ability of shaping the curriculum flexibly was noticed not only as regards the timing, but also the learning dimension:

☺☺ *That pandemic encouraged me to prepare my lectures and record them, and also to organise my classes in such a way that they are easily accessible in the future and could be reused and replayed by the students.*

[R6]

One of those interviewed highlights an interesting topic, wondering whether or not all these “tooling” issues are actually new in some way in teaching.

☺☺ *After all, we used to exchange emails with students. Also before the pandemic, there were individual cases sorted out online. What really happened is that this channel of communication became more intense but it did exist previously.*

[R10]

Looking from this perspective, one may actually think about the innovative nature of the solutions adopted and – referring to the above mentioned barrier in the approach

to e-learning – conclude that it was simply defeated, possibly with a delay. It can also be perceived as an opportunity to learn more, from the teachers' perspective, about the generation of young digital-natives.

*At last I was able to really get to know them better. I had to switch to their communication style.*

[R4]

*I believe we previously did not realise that such opportunities for online teaching existed and could have been used successfully before the pandemic.*

[R3]

During the classes, the mutual contact between the participants of the classes and with the teacher was deprived of the visual component. The biggest problem, according to the respondents, was the cameras being switched off on the students' side. While in the summer semester this was often explained by technical problems, in the winter semester it usually resulted from the students' reluctance to show their image. Due to such behaviour the interactive component of the online classes suffered. The inability to observe the non-verbal part of communication made it difficult to establish an informal conversation and relationships, which in turn reduced the comfort of the classes. The respondents attributed the aforementioned problems to student engagement during the classes precisely to the lack of cameras, which in their opinion increased the level of anonymity.

*They keep the cameras off, they are literally inactive and I believe the interactions between us are less intense than in the case of traditional classes. As I said, they sit there, we talk, we discuss, students may turn to another student to ask for clarification if he is not sure of the answer, or maybe they disagree with each other, but in the case of online classes there is no way of such interactions.*

[R3]

The late arrival of some Erasmus students was another obstacle obstructing the opportunities for social interaction. The lecturers were not informed ahead of time about international students who were supposed to join their groups. It takes up to two weeks before the student joins the group at the beginning of the semester. The lecturer who encountered such problems provided online resources so that the student could catch up, but if it was not the case,

it would be problematic to catch up. Another way to catch up is to get in contact with their mates.

### The additional duties of academic teachers

In the research we also asked about the roles played by academic teachers during the courses. The vast majority of teachers indicated that they took on non-teaching roles and tried to provide various forms of support to foreign students. This support was of a wide nature – from technological to psychological. Respondents mostly felt responsible for the well-being of their students and tried to provide the necessary assistance or refer students to the right institutions or persons. Technological support consisted of giving instructions related to logging into platforms, signing up for online classes, and sometimes even acting as an intermediary to gain access to the network.

*As far as the technical support is concerned I did my best. If they informed me that they had some kind of problems I would contact the rector's office and ask about the Internet connection in the dormitory. I even made some print screens for my students on how to access different content. I started a Facebook group, I closed one where I also shared my tips on how to connect to the classes. But this Facebook group was also intended to keep up their spirits as I had noticed a substantial drop in engagement among them and depression.*

[R2]

Such technical problems, according to what is known from the teachers, would take about one – two weeks at the initial stage of the classes. Oftentimes, teachers would be warned by the Erasmus coordinators or the foreign students service that such a situation may take place.

Psychological support meant building a positive climate, pointing out the good points of the situation, diagnosing students' well-being, showing interest in their affairs, and discussing extracurricular topics. Respondents tried to be partners for their students. For many of them, this type of support was new. During the pandemic, academic teachers often had to provide support to the whole group. It seems that most of them tried to fulfil this role as best they could, although none of the respondents mentioned having received training in this area. In contrast, Erasmus students often required psychological support due to the separation from their families and being outside their home country.


*I always try to have time to establish a friendly relationship with my students and my personal experiences and ideas in order to encourage them to open up and respond to their own ideas and emotions about the fears especially now during the pandemic [...] I have always tried to have a positive attitude, to encourage them to see the bright side.*

[R6]

The organisational dimension of support meant sharing information related to the pandemic or information from other administrative units. Some of the respondents, in addition to their role as teachers, also functioned as faculty Erasmus coordinators, which involved helping with all matters related to the study programme and course completion (for Erasmus students as well as for other teachers who teach classes with them).


*They keep writing to me although I did send to everyone the email addresses and to all teachers, but they still keep on writing to me instead of communicating with each other.*

[R12]

In extreme cases they were almost a single-person service point for Erasmus students. One of the teachers even went to pick up female students in another city when it turned out that they had no transportation to the university. As far as health issues are concerned, respondents helped students to get tested for COVID-19, directed them to appropriate medical clinics, and checked the health status of sick people.


*The question is: Is it possible to leave, or not? It is about COVID-19 testing, now they are frequently asking about quarantine or where they can take the test, in case of COVID they are asking should they stay or should they go.*

[R12]

Working with students using online methods and supporting them entailed other duties. One of them was the workload of lecturers. This specific challenge was characteristic to all types of online education during pandemic regardless of the students' background. According to the respondents, preparing online classes required about 30–40% more time (excluding the time for psychological and organisational help for the Erasmus students), which was not reflected in the teaching salary:

*It is also more time-consuming if you want to prepare materials which will be interesting for the student, easily accessible, and our messages about what to do have to be unambiguous, so it also requires us to put a lot of effort into this way of communicating. I think that it definitely takes at least 30% more time than it normally does. [...] I have the impression that when you are teaching now, you are practically doing something for the students all the time.*

[R6]

However, it should be added that this was not specific only to classes for Erasmus students or those taught in foreign languages. The teaching load increased for all online classes.

### The scope of didactic material

The final didactic issue raised in the interviews was the impact of e-learning on the scope of the material covered and learning outcomes of students. Most respondents did not notice a significant reduction in the material in relation to the time before the pandemic. What did change, however, were the ways in which the material was prepared and presented. Some managed to use online working tools to transfer knowledge (recording presentations/lectures for students to listen to at a convenient time, sending links to videos and other visual materials). Other respondents pointed out the impossibility of conveying all types of content using remote tools, as some require real participation. However, as the respondents' statements indicate, not every experience of face-to-face contact can be replaced by online contact. Such an area is culture, the possibility to visit a museum or attend a live concert. Online methods can be very helpful, but they impoverish contact.

*In our case that whole section dropped out, this is my experience, I also miss this unique personal touch and experience of another culture. This is a fundamental qualitative change, as I said we tried to compensate for this by offering students some links to recordings and other online material, but I do not think it is the same, you missed out*

*on a lot of emotional experience, it is connected not only with the events but also the cultural context of the country you are in, you are associating the emotions with the content you learn [...] and we somehow lost it.*

[R8]

Some respondents pointed out that the form of classes might have influenced the scope of the material covered. It is much easier to convey all content during lectures than during the exercises and workshops, where a lot of time was taken up with switching on microphones, giving voice, sharing the screen, etc.

*I always stick to the plan and in principle I do what I have planned to do, in the case of tutorials surely I agree with you. I conducted mainly lectures with my students, but in the case of tutorials the progress is slower during the online class.*

[R7]

Three respondents indicated that they had failed to fully meet their targets. According to them, they have completed about 20-30% less material than prior to the pandemic. The teachers tried to make up for this material, e.g. through additional classes or homework assignments.

*I mean part of the material say 20% has to be discussed during additional meetings and by giving some homework to students.*

[R9]

*I believe it has been reduced by one-third.*

[R4]

## Intercultural experience in online education

### Opportunities for cultural experience

The main source of intercultural experiences of Erasmus students is (or used to be, before the pandemic situation) participating in didactic and social events, social encounters and interactions that happen on university premises, in libraries etc. Many students did continue to meet in their places (dormitories, rented flats) but many were also excluded (for example, the ones who did not arrive in Poland). As a consequence of pandemic restrictions there were

very few opportunities to learn about the Polish culture. Also in this context not all teachers have the possibilities and willingness to follow the social life of their students.

☺☺ *I am not familiar with the ways my students spend their free time. They were rather reluctant to share their faces on cameras so there was very little social interaction. I heard that sometimes they would go out for a coffee with a mixed group of students from India and Portugal.*  
[R3]

The propensity for socialising depends partly on the national culture. E.g. the Spanish students are very active socially and perhaps for them that lockdown situation was the most disturbing.

Today, as the Polish students stay away from the campuses, there are very few opportunities for social interaction. Opportunities for possible face-to-face meetings were available only to students who lived in the same dormitory. There are sort of Erasmus ghettos in dormitories. The social life experience during the pandemic in dormitories was actually superior to what they could have experienced had they stayed at home. Some students during the pandemic reported to a teacher that they preferred to stay in the dormitory during Christmas break rather than go back to their home countries. One student posted a compilation of videos from her stay in Poland and by watching it the teacher concluded that it was a constant stream of parties in a dormitory:

☺☺ *They would dress up, make jokes, laugh, dance and go sledding. So I believe the dormitory experience was very positive for many students.*  
[R12]

Thus, the social ties among the students could have suffered less than those between the lecturers and the students:

☺☺ *I think social ties were the weakest between the lecturers and the students and those ties did not suffer so much as far as horizontal interaction between students was concerned.*  
[R12]

Meanwhile, social distancing also affected the situation of international students staying in Poland who could not contact their mates staying in the same city in Poland,

but once the lockdown restrictions were eased, they increased their social contacts. Cultural interactions certainly suffered as far as teamwork was concerned. Teamwork, although so important for intercultural exchange, worked very poorly during the pandemic. As one of the teachers observed:

*SS I am not sure whether students really work together or just add their names to the groups which were theirs. In fairness, I can't say that they totally ignored social interactions.*

[R6]

### Course content as a means of cultural experience

A rich source of intercultural experience offered by the teachers was the content of the subjects taught. As mentioned in the previous section, most lecturers use an international perspective in their classes, drawing on academic knowledge but also on students' experiences.

*SS In my classes I present the issue of the business environment through introducing the international dimension. For example, when I lecture on international markets it is always helpful to refer to the countries represented by the students. If an opportunity arises they are always willing to share the national perspective. We also talk about institutional and cultural conditions in different countries represented by the students. We compared the Nordic countries and the Mediterranean countries during the pandemic.*

[R6]

One of the universities runs a special course where the only purpose is to familiarise the students with the Polish culture. Many teachers mentioned that they bring up the cultural aspects and issues during classes. The intensity of the intercultural experience depends to some extent on the subject topic of the lecture. One teacher noted that she was able to engage students from different national perspectives by means of such small details as the insurance for animals, another mentioned topic of social policy measures.

*SS Securing insurance for pets/domestic animals is very popular in the Netherlands and the two British students also confirmed that it is quite natural in the UK - the rest of the group were surprised by this fact and wondered if such insurance is available in Poland.*

[R2]

SS *In my lectures I remember one assignment where each student had to provide five examples of social policy measures from his or her own country, for example obtaining the social security money for the unemployed.*

[R2]

Another exemplary issue discussed during the classes was the issue of the myths and stereotypes, here in relation to immigrants and labelling non-nationals. Such a discussion shows that we face similar problems in different countries and, if so, we can find a universal solution.

SS *The Polish students talked about labelling Ukrainian students but, interestingly, nobody said anything about the labels given to the Poles in Great Britain or in Germany. [...] This shows that, despite many differences, when we start talking about problems, they are the same and in a way we could probably solve them universally.*

[R2]

In one course much was discussed about gender issues. It was a topic which allowed for the clash of different national perspectives. During classes the situation of males and females in the labour market in different countries, the stereotypes in films commercials, family settings, as well as the role of women and men were broadly discussed. In the opinion of the teachers, the students expressed a sort of gratitude for the opportunity to be able to discuss such issues. The students suddenly came to realise that what they took for granted, what they had been taught in other home countries from a very early age and took for granted is not so obvious in other countries. Talking about intercultural perspectives one has to note that some of the topics which are current in Poland are not widely disputed (or even guaranteed) e.g. in Scandinavian countries.

SS *Those twenty-year olds really came to the understanding that the world is very diversified and that one should not judge other cultures. The exchange of views and opinions was the most valuable part.*

[R1]

It has to be noted that the Erasmus+ Programme also draws students from outside of the EU. Their presence brings additional perspectives and makes the cultural experience more

dynamic and multidimensional. Thanks to such international comparisons students can learn about the differences but also about the similarities.

*SS We also get Erasmus Mundus students who are students from outside of Europe who study in Western European universities. Additionally, we get students from our partner universities which means that we get students from Canada, Mexico, China, Korea, but also from Italy, Belgium, Germany, Czech Republic and France. So usually we have quite a wide array of national nationalities represented in classes.*

[R7]

Also, many students staying in Poland in the winter 2020/2021 semester took note of the women strikes in Poland. To them it was quite an experience as most of them arrived from the Western European countries where the problem of abortion in the political discourse occupies a substantially different position than in Poland and they simply could not comprehend the Polish context and why the issues which are taken for granted in their home countries cause such a heated debate in Poland. Thus, this situation allowed for distinct intercultural perspectives: Polish versus the Western perspective. But even discussion between students from Spain, France, Portugal and Italy, which have similar approaches in relation to abortion, allowed for discussion specific descriptions of their cultural perspectives which varied from student to student.

The possibility of opting out is important while discussing such sensitive issues, as some students due to their cultural backgrounds may choose not to take part in discussion around selected topics:

*SS I was very tentative not to push anyone into expressing their views, there have been students who were withdrawn or shy. This would be mainly students from Muslim countries who prefer not to discuss family and personal relationship issues or religion. By no means I was pushy to force them to open up.*

[R1]

To avoid misunderstanding one teacher made it clear to the students that in online education he gave priority to the professional education and the cultural and ethical issues came second. He also declared that he preferred to steer clear of early situations when some of those nationalities get into a confrontational mode.


*I communicated to them that professional and social identity is the most important. The reason for that was that I did not want to instigate any heated discussions such as between the Turks and the Kurds who were both well represented in my student class. During my class in December the Turkish army invaded the Kurdish land so it was quite a challenging situation in the class consisting of both the Turks and the Kurds. In my opinion all the subjects on intercultural issues boiled down to intercultural dialogue.*

[R4]

Every time there is a discussion of this kind an issue arises whether this is the official perspective of the nation which the student represents or it is just his or her personal perspective. This happens both in online and traditional classes.

### Supporting and motivating for cross-cultural encounters

Taking a voice in live discussion is stressful even more during online discussion but online discussions on intercultural issues could be more inquisitive:


*It is easier to arrange a multinational student group to perform one task. For example I had a student group consisting of students from Poland, one student from Azerbaijan, a student from Cameroon and a student from China. I asked their expert group to discuss the topic of aculturism [...]. This first co-operation is a very educational experience. From my observations students who have worked in such groups keep up the social ties after the class but as I said I do not trace the student's private life. From my observations, the students who converse in the courses of my university are also the ones whom I notice in the streets socialising together. I do not know if this is the case in online co-operation.*

[R4]

Teachers tried to form groups of nationalities who did not share a common native language, for example students from Azerbaijan would not be placed in the same group with the Turks. Meanwhile, it is much more difficult to discern whether the students understood the English during the lectures, dialogue and debate as a means of communication and cultural experience suffered and were restrained by online education.

Working in small groups was a common approach to support intercultural exchange. It was possible only in the case of more general subjects. In the case of a more specialised subject it was not possible. One teacher organised her classes in such a manner that the students who worked in groups on the topics referring to the Polish culture were encouraged to seek comparisons between their home countries.

One of the ways practiced by one of the teachers was forming two-person groups to enforce co-operation and encourage socialising while performing the assignment. At the same time, one teacher noted that:

☞ *In my classes I do not make special concessions to international students - I treat them as equals. For us they are just students. I teach about interpersonal communication and having an opportunity to converse with international students. I am able to use them as useful sources of information, I am able to offer more hands-on examples and refer to concrete social situations.*

[R11]

One teacher pointed out that the cultural experience was influenced by his attitude towards speaking in English to Polish students:

☞ *I actually have more restraints while speaking to Polish students in English than to Erasmus students. I fear that I have made a mistake in English.*

[R12]

The university itself can play an active role in stimulating intercultural exchange. Some universities are less advanced in this respect than the others. Some run the mentor/buddy system, where a Polish student assists a newly arrived student from abroad in settling down, providing them all necessary information while at the same time constituting a gateway to Polish culture. In other universities it is still not implemented:

☞ *In our university we do not have an implemented buddy system which comes from US universities. I believe we should implement it in our university. Apart from the integration meetings our University did not take any measures to help the students acquire more international experience.*

[R9]

Intercultural experience is somehow stalled by the tendency of students to stay within their own country circle:

☞ *From my observations the students coming from the same country usually stick together but I also recall students from Spain who put up with the Italians. I observed that students from Belarus and Ukraine quite easily integrate here.*

[R9]

Two teachers observed that Erasmus groups have informal leaders who take the role of information brokers or translators:

☞ *In my case, usually an Erasmus class will have a natural leader who would represent the group and would help me with enforcing some discipline. The positive outcome of such a situation is that such a group would achieve higher grades in the exams. Such natural leaders really help in maintaining the overall education standards.*

[R10]

☞ *Sometimes, in large groups of international students there is a problem of language skills. In the case of French students I sometimes observe a situation when they are using a translator as the student who speaks English best and then translates it to the other students in their group.*

[R8]

Beyond the positive voices and stories of intercultural exchange during courses, there were voices that online education definitely limits the opportunities for social interaction. In extreme cases some students just log into the lecture but in reality they do not participate in it. One teacher mentioned lack of opportunities to have informal conversation and impossibility to observe non-verbal cues during the class. Some teachers were even critical for methods that were praised by their colleagues, e.g. work in small groups:

☞ *Even if I try to instigate an online discussion I do not get much of a response from the students. I do not know what the students do outside of the classes. Occasionally, they slip in a remark on what they do in their free time but this is hardly 10% of what I would achieve otherwise in traditional classes. When I discussed intercultural issues*

*I was able to discern by looking at students' faces whether they are surprised or not regarding the situation described by another student. But now it is impossible. Non-verbal cues were very useful for me while moderating in class discussions. Now, it is practically impossible. In the face of social distancing, they do not want to use cameras and show their faces.*

[R4]



*The Erasmus experience is excellent as far as learning about foreign cultures is concerned. Even if they work online on project assignments they do not really interact, just each team member delivers his or her part and then they merge them together into the final presentation.*

[R7]

### Learning about local contexts

Many Polish teachers associate introducing a foreign student to "Poland" with teaching about some cultural artefacts specific to the national Polish culture. While Poland is a fairly homogenous country, what seems to be overlooked by the Polish teachers is the richness and the educational value of local or regional culture. Perhaps such an omission can be attributed to the relative absence of many cultural traits in the cities lacking long tradition and regional identity and Erasmus students being located usually in the big cities do not have many encounters with the culture of smaller towns and villages. Among the interviewed teachers from three Polish academic centres (Łódź, Lublin, Poznań) only the teachers from the latter put noticeable emphasis on teaching the Erasmus student about the regional and local culture, in this case of the city of Poznań. This included the talks about the Wielkopolska Uprising, the history of Wielkopolska region as the cradle of the Polish statehood and the site of the Polish capital cities. One teacher introduced two fixed items on the agenda related to the regional culture: visiting the Museum of Art and historical centre in Poznań (before the pandemic). Students enjoyed this kind of content, preparing good tasks.



*I was astounded by the work of one student who did excellent work on the Wielkopolska National Reserve (Wielkopolski Park Narodowy). It was an excellent piece of research she did.*

[R5]

Teachers may use the references to known places as a starting point for the discussion on more general topics, e.g. the teacher explained why in Poznań they say “Stary Rynek” [Old Market] whereas in many other cities they would just call it “a main market”.

*SS I explain that in our city we have several markets each for its own district. Understanding the different perspectives was important especially in the case of the German students.*

[R5]

## Mobility imperative: between virtual and physical mobility

### Advantages and disadvantages of virtual mobility

Educational mobility has recently become a more common experience available to growing numbers of students, treated by some even as a requirement in one’s further successful professional and social development. This is a kind of mobility imperative. During the pandemic, physical mobility was limited, however the imperative of mobility as a necessity, a necessary element in one’s resume – persists. Since the Erasmus exchange was not blocked in formal terms, foreign students could still learn – like their local colleagues – remotely, which, with the simultaneous limitation of mobility, may be called virtual mobility.

We asked the teachers whether or not they think that such a form of mobility is better than having no mobility at all. The responses were usually similar to “yes, but...” – and here a number of reservations and conditions would be listed. Most comments related to the duration of such mobility restrictions/limitations: those teachers who participated in the interviews emphasised that this is a certain substitute solution, a “surrogate”, but only for a short time, for the time of the restrictions and obstacles in travelling – the doors but only slightly open. Other comments were related to the individual approach required, so that virtual mobility does not become a rule and a solution available as a rule of thumb in any circumstances and for anyone. One respondent compared teaching to business activities, claiming that even if we are supposed to attend an online meeting once in a while, this is a different situation than when online activities become routine.

Switching to the telecommuting form “for good” would prevent, according to the respondents, benefiting from additional, significant aspects of studying abroad:

*SS The foundation of the Erasmus Programme is cultural exchange, to go and see other places, meet new people, learn a new culture, new*

*customs, and how people live in other countries. It is difficult to achieve that through online education, let us not forget that this part of the study offers a great added value to the education but also this social non-academic part matters, the fact that they are together, they learn and organise parties, it is extremely important but difficult to achieve during online education.*

[R5]

*I believe if someone has an opportunity to go to another country, he or she will learn much more about the cultural environment, the institutions and customs, will strike new friendships, it is much easier than during online education.*

[R6]

Physical mobility could also bring long-term benefits (this applies both to the students, and to the teaching personnel), related to the relations established and the nature of the social contacts, which cannot be repeated online:

*Physical mobility impacts the quality of relationships, for the future and this is extremely valuable.*

[R3]

One disadvantage of virtual mobility always named were the limitations in interpersonal contacts, and impossibility to gain adequate intercultural and life experience, which is priceless for young people in university. A student who must organise their trip, and then their stay abroad, learns quickly that they can do it, and are able to survive in such a situation. In this sense, remote studying, if combined with physical relocation, still brings many benefits:

*They are here but everything goes online which makes a lot of sense. They learn about new people, new countries, they discover the world, they go shopping, explore the cities, architecture, it is a different type of cultural learning, they are able to verify how good their English is. [...]. The Erasmus experience builds confidence. when they first arrive into a foreign country they are intimidated, they have lower self-esteem. They are afraid that if they are gonna find accommodation, how it will go. And suddenly when they have arrived everything seems easy and doable.*

[R12]

However, those students who, while learning online, do not travel physically, lose the option of seeing a different everyday life – for instance on a street, in public spaces, while traveling:

*It is like a Polish student who would go to Japan. He would be astounded with everything he would see and stumble upon. And this is what I mean by life experience which they are currently completely deprived of.*

[R7]

When studying online, the students have little chance of experiencing co-operation in a group, observing each other, mutual differences, compromising etc. – in its remote form, such activities seem quite limited. On the other hand, they still deal with a certain form of otherness: for example they meet native lecturers online, they have contact with the language, a different form of the teaching process, they reach different materials.

It is worth noting, however, that physical mobility with remote participation in classes, despite the possibilities of seeing another country and culture, holds certain significant risks of emotional solitude. This lack of motivation to studying or heightened stress is observed by teachers about Erasmus students:

*People simply lose their momentum, they are less motivated, and perhaps less capable; fear and stress have taken over. Going out to another country means cutting off social ties and the support one gets from his or her family, circle of friends and at the same time you are forced to participate in online education.*

[R1]

Teachers also claimed that excessive "virtuality" may be simply harmful, particularly for young, sensitive people, due to the negative psychological impact of isolation, solitude and long hours with only remote interactions.

*Too much of online education makes people fall into depression and anxiety.*

[R9]

☺☺ *If we continue to emerge into the so called virtual education, we may as well realise that we need more psychiatric hospitals.*

[R10]

As the benefits of maintaining telecommuting form, some teachers additionally list remarkable possibilities associated with e.g. organisation of the courses conducted by native lecturers (in the field of language and cultural studies) or inviting guests from a different part of the world to classes, which can be organised without the unnecessary organisational, logistical, and financial burden.

The respondents elaborated on the possible advantages of hybrid (blended) mobility, which they would see in various forms. One of the proposals included choosing the form of teaching depending on the type of the classes - lectures/theoretical component online, and exercises as the stationary discussion sessions with an experimental component, particularly important in exact sciences. Those subjects that cannot be taught remotely must remain stationary.

The respondents saw the use of the blended mobility form also in situations that were difficult to deliver - e.g. when there is a short holiday break in classes and sometimes the students found it difficult to participate in classes taking place before or after this pause, since they are still travelling (e.g. when returning from holidays in their native country). The possibility of implementing remote classes would facilitate the logistics both for the students and for the teachers. There were also ideas to create a particular database of online classes accessible abroad, which could be used by students as additional facultative courses embedded in their curriculum.

Finally, one argument for maintaining the remote form as an additional method is the financial issue - some students may not be able to afford trips and could use online classes. Thus this virtual approach could open up more opportunities for inclusive approach in the Erasmus+ Programme.

☺☺ *However, it seems to me that it should be possible as an additional form. That even if - I do not know - a student cannot afford it, because - let us be true, there are also some costs that they incur.*

[R7]

Another solution to the problem could be important for those groups of students who for given reasons (e.g. professional, caring duties) cannot move abroad:

☺☺ *It would be very attractive to those who had previously participated in the Erasmus Programme and later they have no such possibility because they have to combine their professional duties with studying and cannot attend classes in another university. Yes, I think it is a good idea.*

[R8]

### Benefits from international co-operation

Another topic which popped up in the discussions was the benefits of the international virtual mobility of students derived by academic teachers. This question brought some difficulties, since it is very difficult for those surveyed to only relate to the pandemic situation, which they summed up rather briefly: these are functional benefits, they consist in being protected against the disease, but also in the possibility of keeping contacts with the international community in general. In this context, it was also claimed that the online classes may “spread” positive energy as long as one can talk with the students.

The respondents were eager to talk about the benefits from co-operating with the Erasmus students, and with international students in general, not necessarily regarding the pandemic. The teachers talked about the pleasure of running such classes and about being in contact with the language. They appreciate self-betterment in this regard while observing students diversity, approaches to solving problems or specific group co-operation:

☺☺ *I personally value such contacts, this multicultural perspective, you can always learn something from you, in my opinion... I would say it is a form of entertainment and enjoying social interactions, a great variety of daily activities in a traditional teaching routine with Polish students.*

[R9]

Teaching classes for students from different countries also stimulates the teachers to improve the content of the classes, so that they match a group of very different recipients and the needs/expectations depending on the field – in order to expand the contents which also cover issues related to the specificity of the students’ countries of origin. The ability to promote certain openness, which is significant for the scientific community, is also

important. One of those surveyed said that with no Erasmus students the university would lose the chance for a kind of openness and free flow of thoughts and ideas. Thus, international co-operation and mobility fit in the frame of the fundamental idea of the university.

☺☺ *We would also lose an opportunity to learn about how it is somewhere else, I mean exchange of opinions. I believe it is important to have this type of opening... perhaps as humans we benefit with these social relations.*  
[R12]

Non-formal communication is also important: it reaches outside the didactic process and creates an opportunity to build social networks, friendships and long lasting connections. These processes could even shape the knowledge and beliefs about different countries and, in the near future, could have an impact on decisions about possible migratory choices.

☺☺ *All those meetings, discussions, commenting which take place between classes or between lines. They all come from different walks of life with those questions. Occasionally they would also reveal some personal issues.*  
[R7]

### The influence of international (im)mobility on the teaching load

The respondents were asked whether or not the (possible) absence of foreign students from the Erasmus exchange was/is noticeable, and whether or not it affected/affects the completion of the teaching load. Such a situation was rarely mentioned, most often it was emphasised that this had no impact on the formal hourly settlements, because there is a sufficient number of didactic hours even without special international hours.

☺☺ *We did have semesters when there were no Erasmus students signed up for our programmes and nothing special happened.*  
[R11]

☺☺ *It is not like somebody has no teaching load because the Erasmus students have not arrived and because of this he cannot make ends meet. It is not such a big issue...*  
[R12]

Commenting on this issue, the respondents, particularly those for whom the hours with the Erasmus students are not a matter of necessity within the didactic activities of the unit, emphasised that their motivation to decide to run the Erasmus classes do not come from the worries about the fulfillment of working hours but rather it is the willingness to undertake a challenge, to face a new situation, and, first of all, practice a foreign language. Oftentimes, the teachers consider the classes with the Erasmus students an opportunity to practice and improve their English skills. Finally, as ascertained by one of the interviewees, these classes were entertaining for teachers.

### Institutional support in the time of the pandemic

The respondents mentioned that the significant role in identifying and responding to students' needs is played by the units dedicated to students' support offices. Such an entity functions under different names at different universities, but its role is noticed everywhere, and usually evaluated very well by teachers, sometimes even in the form of a certain credit of trust regarding the tech support that it provides and the actions intended to integrate the Erasmus students. In general, the opinions on the offices and the persons employed there were very positive:

*SS I am sure that if they turn to the right people in BWZ, they will surely be able to help them.*

[R1]

*SS I think to myself about our students, our international office does something about it, it is our English language studies office, but I have little cue.*

[R6]

*SS I am really happy with our university's international office by sending a self-study guideline on how to use campus and MS Teams.*

[R12]

Another issue raised was the role of the person in charge of the Erasmus students support office in intermediation between a student and the teacher when choosing the classes, consisting in uncovering the "secrets" of the subject and the teacher, notifying what the classes are about, encouraging to enroll on them:

»» *A student from another country does not know who I am. So the person who can help to choose the courses is very important.*

[R2]

The statements of the teachers point to several actions taken (or suggested to be undertaken by teachers) by a university to respond to issues reported by students of the Erasmus Programme, which can be described as "good practices". Here, the following can be named:

- » providing guarantee for Polish students studying within Erasmus that, in the case they decide to return home during a semester (e.g. due to the introduction of a lockdown), they will be able to continue their studies in the same semester in Poland:

»» *The faculty guaranteed Polish students they could continue to study in Poland and they would not miss the semester if they interrupted their study abroad.*

[R12]

- » organising welcome meetings online:

»» *I think it would be wise to organise such sessions for them: let them connect, let them exchange information on the platform, let the discussion flourish, let someone talk about his or her country, we used to have such Erasmus days in the past, they would present themselves, sometimes in the auditorium, they would present some regional food from their own countries. But even today you can organise such events online if you have a topic to discuss but they are not really keen on working with the cameras.*

[R6]

- » making the faculty infrastructure available for participating in remote classes on campus, in the event that the student has issues with hardware, or their online connection
- » notifying of logistical matters associated with the rules of moving around during the pandemic, the possibility of leaving the country, trips
- » flexibility in the form of assessment and exams, in particular in the case of sudden organisational changes during a semester:


*We were trying to offer them some alternatives so that they could express themselves in different ways: somebody could write something, send an essay, if this person was not able to attend online classes live.*

[R8]

In the area of the university's support in organising remote teaching in relation to classes with students of the Erasmus Programme, the teachers would address mostly the technical support (although rarely in the form of delivering, for example, missing equipment), and methodical support for the whole teaching process, regardless of whom the classes were prepared for (helping with MS Teams, using various tools). Some teachers said it straightforwardly that the training programmes dedicated to working with Erasmus students (commonly referred to as "multicultural") are insufficient, and in one case, where such a training was completed, it was evaluated as being too time-consuming:


*I know there is diversity training but what scared me most was that it lasted eight hours and I did not sign up for it because I had no time capacity to do that.*

[R2]

It is possible that there is a niche here to be filled by university offices (more flexible adaptation of the training offer to the teachers' capacities), but again – as in the case of supporting students – their role in supporting the teachers in their work with the Erasmus students was assessed highly.

### Teachers' ideas to improve virtual mobility

When asked whether the pandemic has changed somehow the perception of the Erasmus Programme, the respondents answered "not really". However, the general change in the perception of mobility as such is visible:


*The pandemic proved that mobility and freedom are not as obvious as we might have thought.*

[R2]


*Today we perceive mobility from a different angle.*

[R12]

Oftentimes, the teachers were using terms related to the temporary nature of the present situation, defining it as transitional, extreme, emergency one – comparing what is currently going on with the so-called “norm” concerning unrestrained physical mobility. This limited trust towards mobility, and sometimes its physical prevention, has caused, however, a noticeable, significant reduction in the number of persons who enroll into the Erasmus+ Programme, which is demonstrated by the data from the current spring recruitment for the next academic year. One of the persons described the present situation as a threat for the Erasmus+ Programme, which, at the moment, has evidently shrunk in numbers. However, teachers are trying to overcome this somehow, having a rather positive vision of the future.

☺☺ *It is good that Erasmus still lives on, let us come to terms with the fact that this is such a difficult time in its history but let us hope that it will go back to normal and its original format.*

[R5]

In this context the teachers were also asked what changes the university could make to help/improve/upgrade the ability to implement virtual mobility. Several proposals emerged, which can be divided into those concerning the Erasmus exchange directly, as well as those simply tied with remote teaching and innovations in this regard.

The required proposals of actions for Erasmus refer to the situation of limited physical mobility; and thus – to the reduced number of people who decide to join the exchange. Hence the idea of intensifying the promotional activities within the programme at the university level. As it was noticed by one of the participants of the study:

☺☺ *What I am missing is the promotion format adjusted to the target audience, for example, I am missing a promotional video even on YouTube where we would in three sentences with a nice background music present ourselves and our pictures, if we work from home we can also demonstrate that these classes are running, demonstrate happy students, maybe one or two students would like to say something nice about our class.*

[R2]

Such a formula could make it clear what the exchange looks like in practice, it would make it possible to see this situation “live”, and perhaps it would make it easier for potential scholarship receivers to make an informed decision. At some departments, other promotional initiatives were

undertaken, such as using Facebook as a tool of information spread. It seems before the pandemic the possibilities of undertaking the unusual promotional activities were higher – e.g. meetings with Erasmus students at exhibitions of photographs from their region of residence:

*SS We were planning to organise such an exhibition in our faculty last year but it was supposed to start three days after the pandemic was officially announced, it was supposed to be attended by the consul general of the Republic of Slovenia so we did have an idea like that. but it was spoiled by the pandemic and it was supposed to be a promotional event for the Erasmus+ Programme.*

[R12]

However, even this kind of activities could be, as suggested, transferred to the virtual space where meetings promoting trips with students being in Poland within Erasmus could take place, and with Poles, who have returned from it to the country. One of those surveyed has recently organised a Q&A webinar within the spring recruitment to the programme, which enjoyed a lot of popularity, despite being organised “after hours”, which proves the demand for such initiatives. One teacher-coordinator was communicating with students while sitting in his kitchen, calling it “Erasmus kitchen”.

Other proposals from teachers are related to facilitating the study process itself and living in a foreign country (both for foreign students in Poland, and for Poles abroad). The following was proposed:

- ⌋ to facilitate obtaining class credits for obligatory subjects in Poland after the student returns from their exchange period;
- ⌋ to develop a procedure in the form of the so-called simple path: what each student must know and do after making a positive recruitment decision;
- ⌋ to create the so-called “Erasmus windows” – semesters coordinated at the curriculum level at universities, where it is possible to study in English only optional and general courses (to avoid missing credit points for obligatory courses for those who are going abroad);
- ⌋ to raise the scholarship allowances for Erasmus students;
- ⌋ to organise online social meetings for Erasmus students – with lecturers or people from the Erasmus offices, where it would be possible to make informal contacts, discuss topics other than studying;
- ⌋ to organise additional lectures for Erasmus students, similar to open lectures;

- to organise online sightseeing – for persons who did not relocate to Poland. Such a solution should be based on systemic support, not on a teacher's individual initiative.

*SS Maybe some type of virtual sightseeing for those who cannot show up in person and who only signed up virtually for the Erasmus+ programme, these types of things. I know they have a separate class dedicated to discovering the history and culture of Poland. I know they would visit museums and operas. Today it is much more complicated but you can still visit the museum virtually so that they get a gist of what it is like.*  
[R7]

In the scope of the generally understood remote teaching, the following proposals emerged:

- formalisation of the requirement for turning cameras on (which, in relation to teaching classes in a foreign language, is particularly important, since this allows to catch situations where something was not understood or was misunderstood by students);
- create conditions and technical support in professional video recording to be made available to students in the case of exact sciences (e.g. recording experiments in a laboratory), and make the university's streaming equipment and tools available, so that the teachers do not have to run classes only with the use of computer cameras in their own houses;
- in relation to the teaching load, the introduction of new hourly conversion factors that take into consideration the fact that preparation of remote classes requires significantly more time than in the case of traditional classes;
- certain permission to organise class time flexibly: it is difficult to teach remote classes that take, in principle, 90 minutes, since the focus and attention span of the participants is difficult to maintain in such a lengthy time frame.

# Recommendations



On the basis of the study, we draw the following recommendations:

- 1) **Supporting physical mobility of students:** The student mobility should continue to be supported, as it seems to provide deeper intercultural learning experience than virtual mobility. Potentially, the options of blended mobility – merging some online activities with physical (but short term) movement – would be beneficial to some groups that otherwise might not be able to participate in the programme.
- 2) **Highlighting social dimension of the Erasmus stay as a learning base:** The study indicated the importance of social dimension for assuring learning outcomes from exchange, student well-being, or even educational quality. Even in online education, social dimension needs consideration and calls for particular methodologies that allow to build relations and intensify contacts, or even small talk, between students. Student organisations should reflect on possible methodologies of working with international students online in order to support them in avoiding isolation if needed and overcoming the limitations of national bubbles.
- 3) **Higher education institutions should implement solutions aimed at enhancing intercultural learning of Erasmus students:** There is a need for universities to actively reflect on intercultural learning opportunities for Erasmus students and to implement solutions to strengthen this dimension. The courses for Erasmus students should be redesigned in relation to the possibilities of sharing knowledge from different countries and to critically compare it and discuss it, in particular if in online mode. Teachers engaged in Erasmus student didactics should be provided training on particular teaching methods in this regards. Also, special courses – also outside curriculum – introducing the students to the Polish culture and history could be proposed. Finally, an institutional solution of mentor/buddy support should be provided to constitute a gateway to Polish peers; however, the engaged volunteers would need some preparation to this role.
- 4) **Higher education institutions should continue to provide adequate administrative support:** Even though students in general highly evaluated the support of the institutions, some aspects would need consideration. Registration to courses is a problematic endeavor for incoming Erasmus students, and institutional solutions should be elaborated. Some students faced issues with course registration and fulfillment of their learning agreements due to class cancellation or low provision of places, as well as timing of registration. The provision of information from universities in regard to mental health

support should be improved. Some consideration of additional support to students from non-EU countries as regards legal aspects of their stay is needed.

- 5 **Enhancing experiences of Erasmus students in smaller cities:** Place of study, and in particular the size of the city where the higher education institution is located, significantly differentiate the experiences of students. While some aspects might not be easily changed, there is a need for further reflection and research on the determinants of students' satisfaction and learning, to potentially build up on the positive aspects of smaller towns experiences. Potentially, the higher education institutions could provide Erasmus students with an extracurricular programme which is focused on cultural and social activities, and providing mentor/buddy programme to improve integration in peer groups.
- 6 **Promoting Poland as Erasmus destination:** The study indicated some aspects that should be considered when promoting Poland as Erasmus receiving country, related to e.g. affordability of living, attractive culture and landscapes, good geographical location, opportunities to explore unknown part of Europe. Still, educational aspects should not be overlooked, as they prove to stay at the center of student attention next to non-academic aspects, these being quality of education, rich course offer in English, access to facilities (such as laboratories, archives). The promotion of Poland as a destination country could also refer to positive features of cities and prestige and quality of selected universities.
- 7 **Continuing research in regard to Erasmus students experiences:** Taking into account high engagement of Erasmus students in this study, it is important to continue efforts of listening to the students' voices, so as to maintain an au courant perspective on how their perspectives on Erasmus outcomes during the pandemic (and beyond) evolves. The future research should center on Partner countries participants in Poland, exploring the potential of this group of incoming students. Critically, the diversity of students, in regard to their country of origin, gender, level of studies, and - further - economic situation and mobility capital, needs to be considered.



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This report is a valuable document of unprecedented developments in internationalized higher education, and in taking account of students and staff members views, illustrates both sides of the story. As COVID-19 crisis that both feeds upon and disrupts geographical mobility, Erasmus students are vulnerable to disruption, in relation to their educational progress and broader processes, such as heightening employability and strengthening intercultural understanding. Added to this shock to the system are challenges faced for Erasmus+ as a programme, with a potential loss of economic and political capital for funding organizations and host universities, as mobile students return home or decide not to travel in the first place. As such, we need research to inform us about how to sustain mobility at a time of restricted circulation, and look towards means of avoiding atrophy in mobile career trajectories and in institutional platforms.

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**The Foundation for the Development of the Education System (FRSE)** has been operating since 1993. Currently, it is the Polish National Agency of the Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps for 2021-2027. At the same time, it carries out European information and education initiatives: eTwinning, Eurodesk Poland, Eurydice, Europass, EVET and EPALE. The foundation also supports co-operation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe through the Polish-Lithuanian Youth Exchange Fund, the Polish-Ukrainian Council of Youth Exchange, SALTO Eastern Europe and Caucasus Resource Centre. Since 2014, FRSE has been involved in the implementation of the Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development.