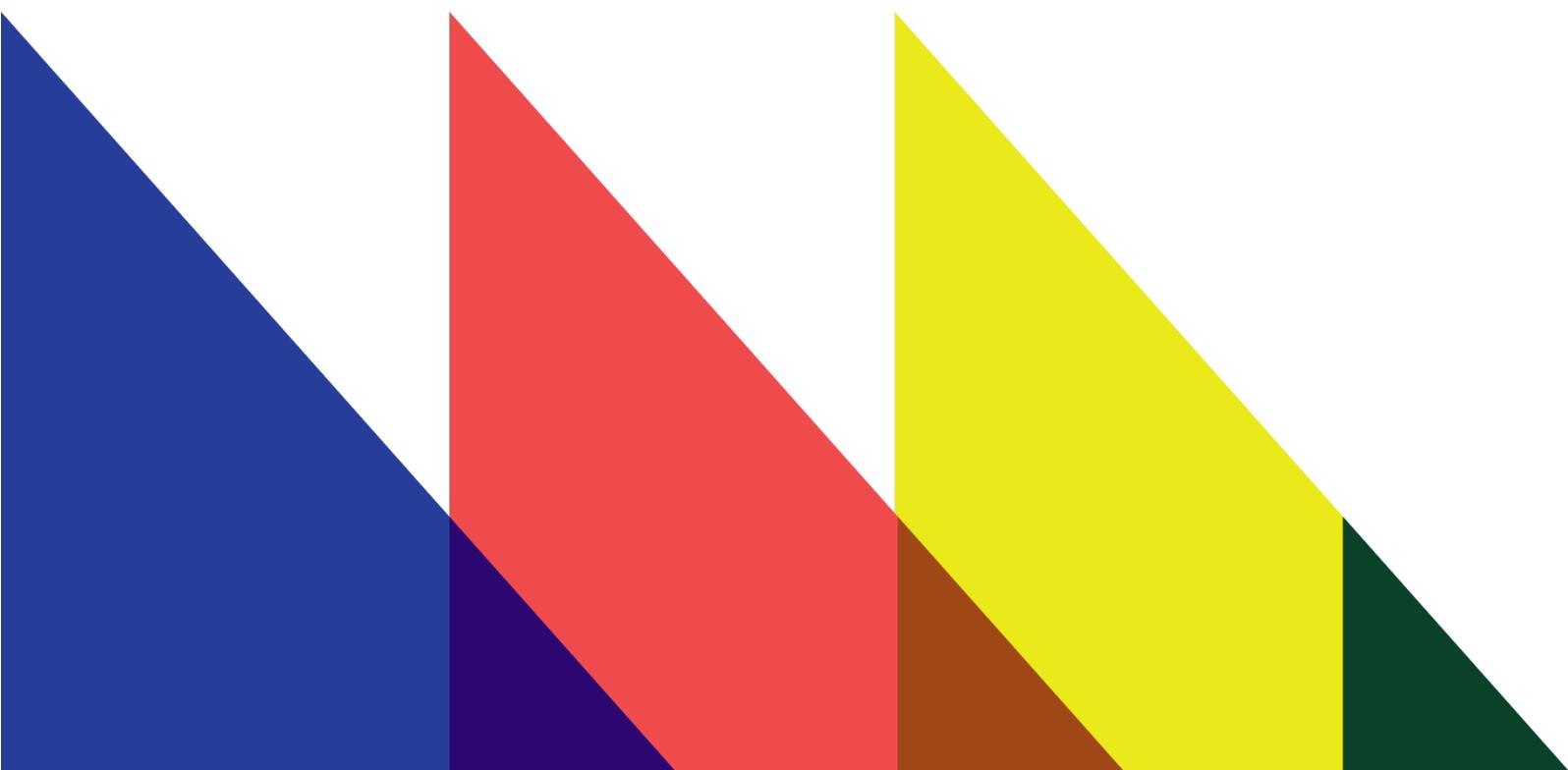


European Network on International Student Mobility
Connecting Research and Practice

**Integrating non-European
students
into local communities**

ENIS Policy Brief 02/2023

31 May 23





1. Snapshot overview

This policy brief is intended to guide non-European credit-seeking international students in their integration into European universities and countries they are studying in. Although the overall aim of policy-brief is non-European students, we believe the presented results are especially relevant for the International Credit Mobility (ICM) programme, which is the most important instrument for short-term mobility from outside Europe. The launch of the ICM Programme in 2015, with which the ERASMUS+ exchange scheme supports the mobility of non-European students, led to a noticeable increase in the number of credit-seeking international students from non-European countries. As these students often come from societies and cultures that are more distant from European cultures, they experience more academic, social, and cultural challenges while trying to integrate into their local communities (9). Based on the available scientific literature on international students in Europe, this policy brief provides insights into the challenges that non-European students experience. Considering that non-European, and especially ICM students have not yet received much empirical attention in the literature, we draw on the findings of studies investigating the challenges that international students (not exclusively non-European students) encounter in Europe (1, 7, 9). Accordingly, international students are challenged in terms of academic issues (e.g., unrealistic performance expectations, adjustment difficulties to the academic environment, competition with local students), language competence, financial problems, decreased social support and loneliness, and sociocultural demands (6), as well as issues regarding diversity (e.g., experiencing discrimination towards their race, ethnicity, and gender) (1, 3, 7). By and large, we recommend support through academic mentorship, target and contact language awareness, favourable financial schemes and visa waivers, and a buddy/ambassador/mentor system to support non-European students' integration into the target communities.

2. Main issue to be addressed

This policy brief focuses on the following two key issues:

1. What social and cultural integration challenges do non-European students experience in Europe?
2. Could effective local community engagement support the social and cultural integration process of non-European credit-seeking students?

The target groups of this policy brief are (i) supra-national authorities for policymaking (e.g., European Commission); (ii) national authorities for structuring integration programmes (e.g. National Agencies); (iii) European Higher Education institutions hosting non-European international students; (iv) local governments (e.g. municipalities); and (v) non-governmental organisations (e.g. The Erasmus Student Network).

3. Key findings

Among all ERASMUS+ students, 60% (around 37,000) studied abroad in 34 different programme countries (33,700 in 2019), while the remaining 40% (25,000) sojourned in a non-European partner country worldwide. The cooperation with these partner countries is referred to as the ICM programme (4). Most of the ICM mobility budget to Europe was allocated to South Mediterranean, Western Balkan, and Eastern Partnership countries (scan the QR code for a detailed table). Additionally, a substantial budget was granted to African, Caribbean, Pacific

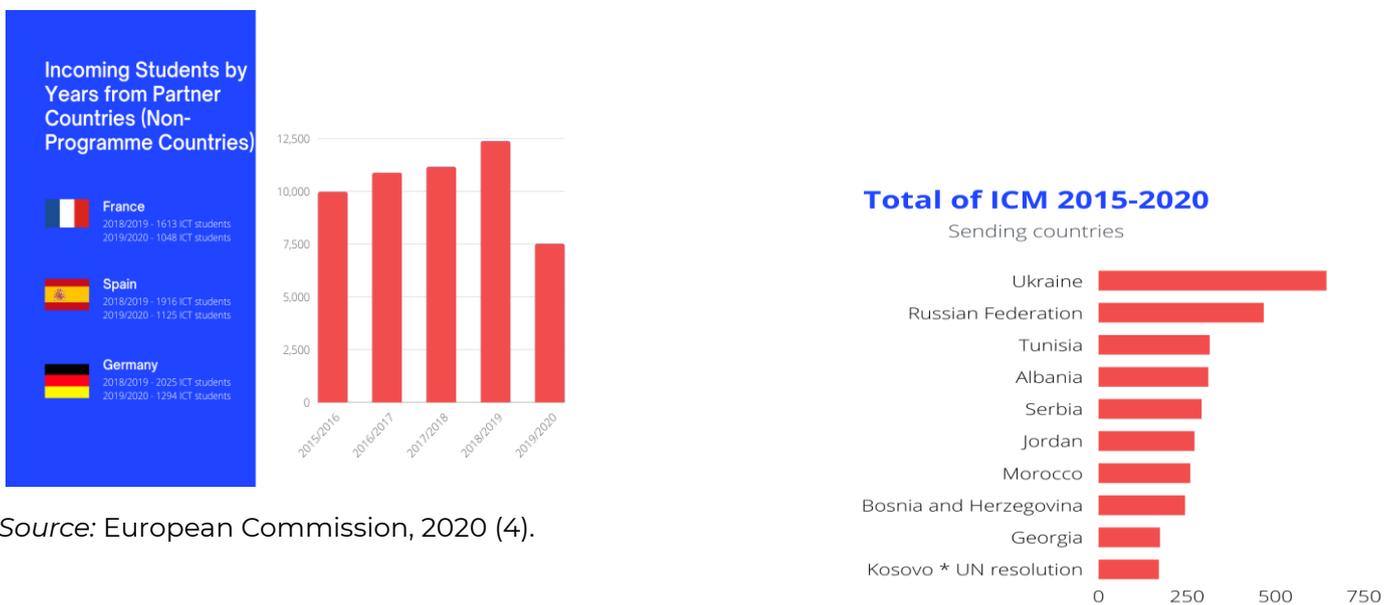


nations, as well as Latin American and Asian countries (4). The most popular receiving and sending countries are presented in Figure 1.



Please scan the QR code for the number of incoming students from non-programme countries per year (4)

Figure 1. Most popular receiving and sending countries



Source: European Commission, 2020 (4).

Despite its burgeoning popularity, ICM presents also challenges, and many of these problems also apply to other non-European credit seeking students. Non-European international students may encounter several general problems other international students experience as well, such as issues with academic integration, language competence, financial problems, diminished social support, and social and cultural demands (7). Furthermore, they might also experience challenges such as a lack of pre-departure information about the essentials of their stay abroad (e.g. application procedures, paperwork, available programmes, finding accommodation, and registering for classes) as well as a lack of orientation and local community integration opportunities as they may not be well-informed about the destination country, and issues concerning diversity within the broader social context (e.g., case of minorities or ethnic differences in the host community) (1, 6, 7).

In essence, non-European students, like all international students, often face academic challenges finding a matching programme or curricula in their host institutions due to the differences between home and host educational systems. Moreover, credit recognition and transfer are major structural challenges (10) that international students experience. For instance, non-European countries which do not have compatible systems with the Bologna Process and the ECTS, such as Singapore, face more structural issues. The second common challenge is insufficient pre-departure proficiency in the target language, which will hinder academic and



social integration (3). Issues concerning insufficient financial means and lack of funds hinder sociocultural adaptation (e.g., huge discrepancy between currency exchange, devaluation of some currencies) (1, 10). Diminished social support is potentially also a crucial issue for non-European students, as it is for all international students (12). Geographical distance between home and host countries for non-European students especially might increase the stress and the feeling of loneliness. Last but not least, sociocultural differences can result in more distance between non-European students and the local people (8).

4. Recommendations

01 | Academic integration – academic mentorship is needed

Rienties et.al. (8, 9) found that non-European students have more adjustment issues, which leads to lower personal/ emotional well-being. Non-European students could therefore receive directed support, from both sending and hosting institutions (5). To support the successful integration of non-EU students, both sending and hosting institutions can provide directed support, which refers to specific assistance and resources tailored to the unique academic needs and challenges (5). In order to overcome the credit recognition problems, before partnership agreements are signed, sending and hosting institutions can examine the curricula in detail to facilitate the process of taking courses. In order to minimize the academic challenges that incoming student encounter, the receiving institution should conduct a targeted counselling process for non-European students. Allison and Gabriels (1) suggest that the students should be informed before the mobility about how learning will be assessed in the host institution, how the grades will be transferred, what are the academic requirements of the courses in the host institution.

02 | Language Competence – a foreign language support system is needed

A key element to successful integration into the host community is related to communicative competence in a lingua franca (e.g. English) and a basic proficiency in the local language (11). The sending institution should certify that non-European students meet the host institution's language requirements and the host institution should not accept non-European students who do not meet the institution's language requirements. In addition, the receiving institutions should support the local language development of non-European students and employ a lingua franca in formal obligatory contexts, such as higher education institutions. Taking bilateral action is essential.

03 | Financial issues – financial support mechanisms are needed

Waiving visa and residence permit fees from non-European Erasmus students provide great convenience to these students. In addition, these students could be allowed to work with a proper visa and priority is given to them in on-campus job opportunities; this will facilitate both financial and socio-cultural adaptation of students. In addition, the students should be



informed about the cost of living abroad (e.g. accommodation, food etc.) before their stay abroad (1, 5).

04 | Reduced social support – buddy/ambassador/mentor systems are needed

Pre-departure (at home) and upon-arrival (at the host institution) orientations are key to integration (6). Relying on domestic and international students to assist incoming students should be arranged by the host institutions (5). Allison and Gabriels (1) state that mobile students should be matched with local students, buddies, to ease their integration into through the new institution and the new local area. This should include not only students but also all other stakeholders, such as instructors and university officers. Multilingual and multicultural practices should be welcomed at all levels. Regarding acculturation and adaptation, policy making authorities should provide more robust support through updated policies and trained practitioners for intercultural communication and multiculturalism which is likely to enhance the integration and adaptation of international students.

05 | Socio-cultural demands – supporting local connections and extra-curricular activities are needed

The interaction between international students and local communities should be supported (1) through on and off campus learning. The literature highlights that local engagement into the community through social service (e.g. voluntary work in child-care institutions or nursing homes) can help integration (2). Moreover, extra-curricular activities can be organised by student organisations, receiving higher education institutions, or local governments and city councils to integrate non-European students into the immediate community, such as arranging community get-togethers with local people. This is a good way to be culturally responsive and to promote cultural inclusiveness to share experiences and understanding. Allison and Gabriels (1) suggest that local and regional authorities should be aware of existing student mobility frameworks and develop internationalization strategies for their local and regional environments. They also argue that universities should work with the local municipalities for the better integration of international students in the host city.

Good practice example

There are several refugees and forced migrant-oriented projects which present some good practices to integrate these newcomers into the local community. We believe such good practices are also relevant in the non-European students studying in Europe context.

University of Barcelona – The Support Programme for Refugees and People from Conflict Areas. This programme includes several action lines: a course to support transition to university, integration into local communities and administrations, supporting international cooperation projects, and solidarity initiatives co-financed by Barcelona City Council. The details can be found here: <https://www.solidaritat.ub.edu/>.



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