

European Network on International Student Mobility  
**Connecting Research and Practice**

**COVID-19 and  
global student mobility flows**  
**ENIS Policy Brief 04/2023**  
11 July 2023





## 1. Snapshot overview

COVID-19 caused a major interruption in the steady increase in international students' numbers over the past three decades. The measures taken by governments and the changed academic, social, and political milieu that emerged during the pandemic clearly impacted the decision-making process of students regarding their international mobility. More recently, evidence from different countries indicates a strong rebound of international student numbers, almost matching the situation before the COVID-19 pandemic (Institute of International Education, 2022; Australian Government Department of Education, 2022). COVID-19 resulted in outcomes such as a halt in educational activities, a lack of alternatives to mobility types, an absence of systematic crisis management and a shortage of well-being support that demand consideration by policymakers focusing on exchange mobility at national and transnational levels.

## 2. Main issue to be addressed

The measures installed to control the pandemic significantly reduced international student mobility (ISM) flows. Furthermore, the pandemic posed significant challenges for mobile students, including disruptions to educational activities, xenophobia in host nations, financial difficulties, increased anxiety, mental health, and well-being problems.

In the aftermath of the initial shock of the pandemic, a substantial number of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) found themselves in a rather volatile situation, seeking alternative approaches for guiding their international student mobility programs, with the possibility of distance education or hybrid formats (4). It has also been reported that students' reactions to this new context were mixed, with some students traveling to their envisaged host destination and others cancelling or postponing their mobility plans. This shift in behaviour had an enormous impact on student mobility patterns, which evolved from a higher education issue to a worldwide phenomenon linked to geopolitical influences and restrictions enforced by affected nations. Furthermore, numerous international students were stranded in their host country for an extended time, leaving many with an uncertain future of completing degrees on time. The pandemic also affected social interaction and cultural immersion among both local and international students.

In this context, this policy brief provides an analysis of ISM flows at the EU and global levels. Based on a systematic review of 62 COVID-19-related research articles and reports, published between 2020 and 2022, it synthesizes key evidence on how COVID-19 has impacted ISM flows.

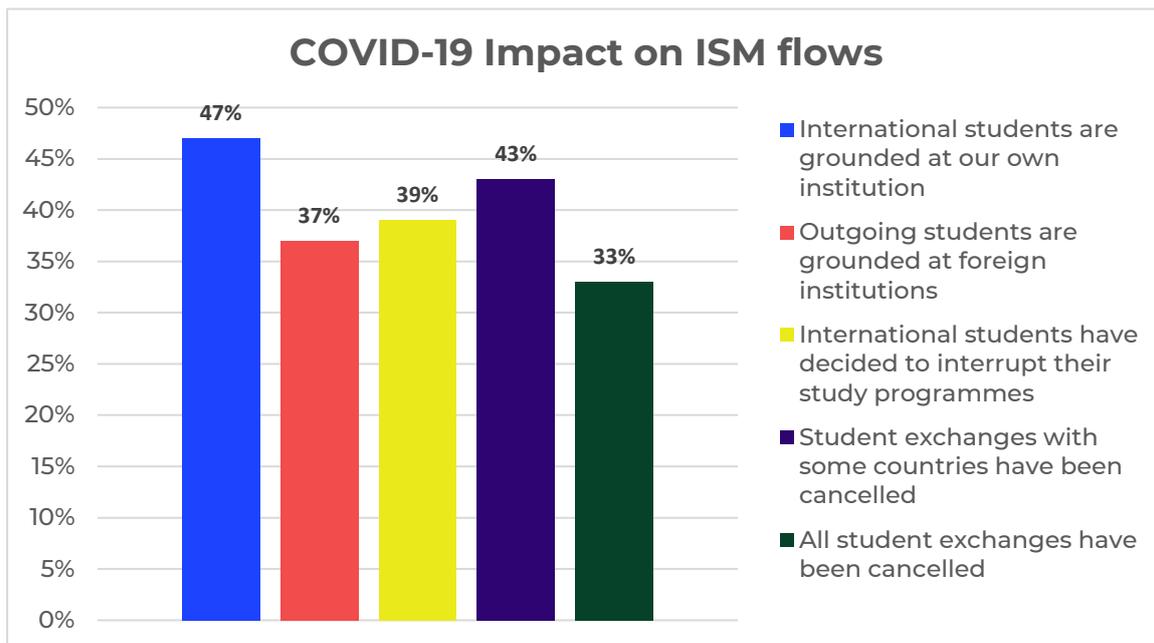
## 3. Key findings

When the pandemic started, the initial response of governments and institutions was often to suspend physical mobility, repatriate national students abroad, and send foreign students back to their home countries. Thereafter, HEIs were prompted to find alternatives. For instance, in the United States virtual exchanges were launched as an alternative to returning home or delaying mobility plans, in order to retain international students' participation interest despite mobility program temporary closures (2). However, research indicates that many international students



disliked virtual modes of study because they were not perceived as effective as face-to-face study for gaining intercultural skills (5).

Many Asian (and especially Chinese) students gave up on Western student exchange destinations for health and safety reasons, favouring to move to closer destinations such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan (6). For example, the Global Survey of the International Association of Universities (IAU), conducted between 25 March to 17 April in 109 countries and two Special Administrative Regions of China (Hong Kong and Macao), indicated that 33% of HEIs decided to suspend ISM programs regardless of the supported types of mobility (5) (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Survey results of the COVID-19 Impact on international student mobility (5)**

Another striking consequence of the pandemic was that certain countries gained popularity, while others lost their attractiveness to international students. For example, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand did not figure anymore as top destination countries for international students, whereas East Asian countries such as Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan emerged as major destinations (6).

When analysing more closely ISM trends throughout the pandemic, substantial heterogeneity exists. According to a DAAD report by Kercher and Plasa (4), mobile students from China were the most commonly affected in taking ISM programs in Germany, followed by India and Italy, resulting in a decrease in student numbers from these countries, whereas mobile students from Mexico, the United States, and Iran were the least affected students to participate in outgoing exchange programs, resulting in an increase in student numbers from these countries. Furthermore, mobile students from EU countries outnumbered non-EU mobile students in the UK. However, this increase was primarily due to the home-fee status granted to EU students until the 2020-2021 academic year compared to non-EU students (7).

In summary, significant heterogeneity can be observed when considering the impact of the pandemic on ISM flows, with some HEIs and countries failing to realize the pandemic's long-lasting social and economic impact on ISM programs and students' academic careers. As a



consequence, the number of incoming and outgoing exchange students fluctuated between 2020 and 2021, implying that many HEIs could have acted more promptly and alleviated the situation. Some HEIs, however, did not have a contingency plan or resources available. Without doubt, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused some dramatic disruptions in student mobility, resulting insignificant changes in student flows as well as the notion of student participation and experiences. This is anticipated to be closely monitored in the near future by the authority involved with global mobility schemes.

## 4. Recommendations

### 01 | For (supra)national agencies and governments

The lessons learnt in managing ISM at institutional, national, and global levels provided rich resources to be analysed systematically and turned into practical guides to prepare practitioners for crisis management in the future. National governments and supranational governmental organizations should dedicate funding for such topic-specific research and the mainstreaming of best practices for capacity-building in the European ISM sector. Collaboration with actors outside the EU could be encouraged to find missing links in crisis responses.

### 02 | For the European Commission and associated agencies

Contradictory information about the mobility trends and patterns were displayed during the pandemic. Our analysis underlined the need for a more coordinated approach for data collection. To do this, national governments and supranational governmental organizations (e.g., UNESCO, OECD, European Commission and its agencies, e.g., Eurostat) should work more closely with each other and with other mobility data collection agencies at national and supranational levels.

### 03 | For national agencies and governments

More contextual data is needed for explaining the changes and the uncovered underlying factors related to how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted ISM flows. National governments and supranational governmental organizations could invite national experts on ISM to contribute to country-specific studies on the driving forces behind the changes observed in trends and patterns of mobility.

### 04 | For national agencies and HEIs

Correlations, if not causal relations, between changing mobility destinations (x) and new forms of mobility (y), especially virtual or hybrid formats, deserve more in-depth research by academics and policy researchers to assess the strength of the relationship, as well as the long-term impact of the changes of destinations or forms of mobility in global ISM. National governments and supranational governmental organizations could consider financing such kind of studies through dedicated calls for project proposals or tenders.

### 05 | For governmental bodies



The COVID-19 pandemic is only one factor that has affected ISM in the past three years. The difference between correlation and causation is hard to make. Therefore, national and supranational governmental organizations could promote the collection and analysis of contextual data regarding the impact of other global factors that affected ISM – such as geopolitical changes related to the war in Ukraine and the trade war between China and Australia on other kinds of mobility (e.g., goods).



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