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# International Student Mobility Data for Research and

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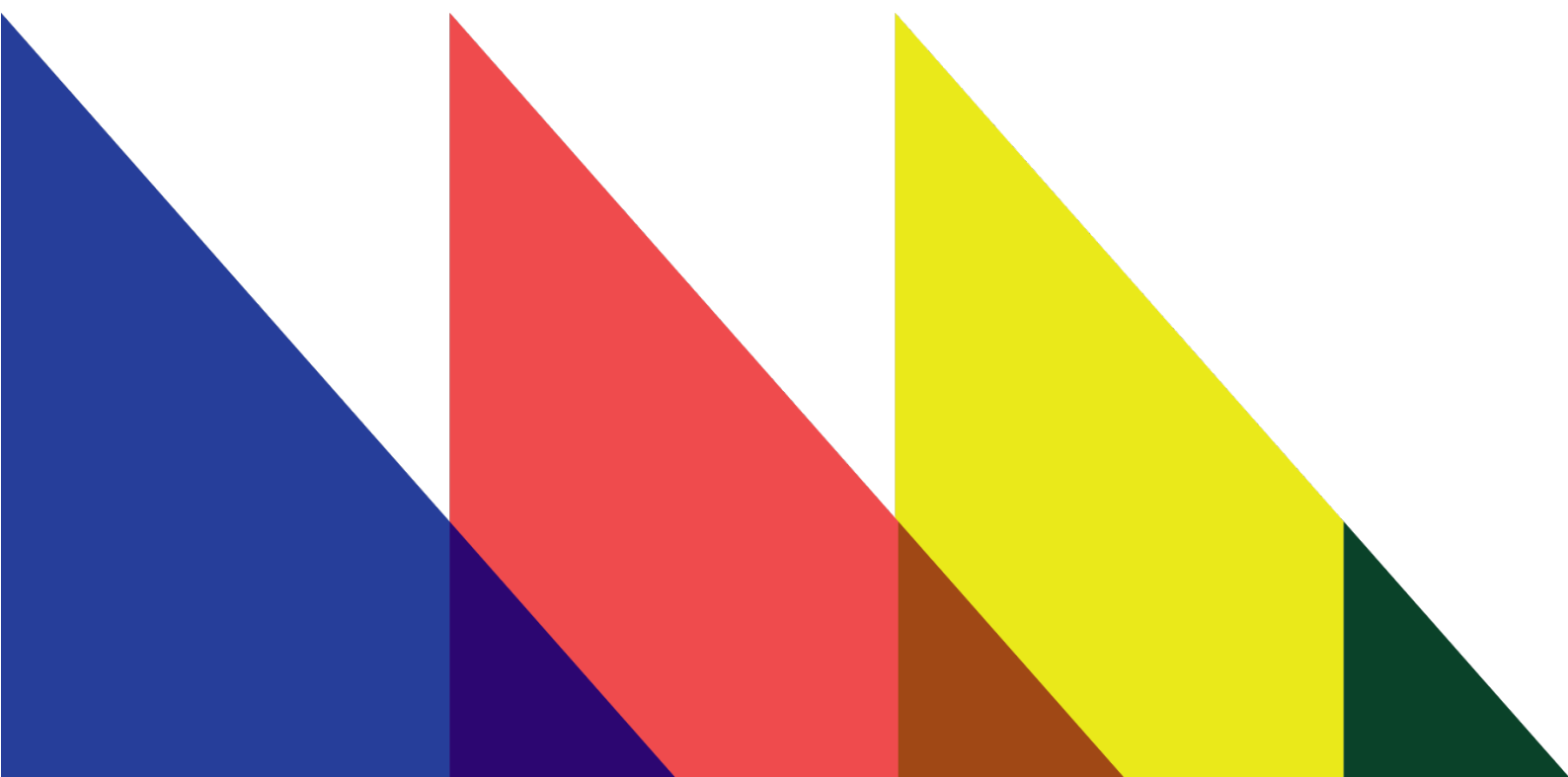
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European Network on International Student Mobility  
**Connecting Research and Practice**

**International Student Mobility Data for Research and  
Practice**

**ENIS Policy Brief 02/2025**  
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### 1. Snapshot overview

With rising international student numbers, International Student Mobility (ISM) has become a significant topic for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers worldwide. Effectively managing and investigating ISM requires clear, accessible, and comparable data sets based on shared definitions of ISM. Currently, inconsistencies in such definitions hinder the aggregation of ISM data from various sources, which in turn affects how ISM data can inform management decisions at both institutional and national levels. Divergent definitions of ISM and the use of conflicting data sources lead to ineffective national policies and weak ISM management at the institutional level. In particular, recent trends in the enrollment of students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., refugees and migrants who are either temporary or permanent residents of host countries) categorized as “internationally mobile students” complicate ISM management at the meso or national levels. This also skews global ISM statistics due to inconsistent practices regarding the inclusion or exclusion of migrant data across different countries. Consequently, there is a pressing need to refine and redefine ISM by distinguishing various forms of mobile students and establishing consistent and systematic data mapping for ISM on a global scale. This will enhance the comparability and accuracy of ISM data, facilitating effective policy advising targeted at different types of mobile students.

### 2. Main issues to be addressed

Fragmentation, inconsistent definitions, and limited accessibility—especially for data held by private companies—continue to pose challenges for ISM data. The absence of a common data infrastructure for ISM leads to various issues in the research, policy, and practice of ISM. First, there remains a need for shared definitions for each of the different forms of ISM, as well as the terminology used to describe these mobilities and the types of students involved. Refining and reworking definitions related to ISM is a crucial first step toward effectively mapping ISM data and ensuring data comparability. Second, based on these shared definitions, there is a need to map existing ISM datasets. Parallel data categorizations and infrastructures for these categorizations, centered around a set of commonly agreed definitions and terminology, will yield more accurate estimates of ISM numbers.

While proprietary ISM data may remain behind paywalls, ISM policymakers and practitioners are urged to take joint actions to achieve, first, a more refined mapping of open ISM data by enhancing the global data infrastructure and, second, improving the accessibility of open ISM datasets. ISM data remains scattered across platforms and lacks semantic interoperability due to inconsistent definitions and terminology, which slows down comprehensive policy analyses and international comparisons. Third, there is a need to raise awareness to boost the visibility of existing ISM datasets and their potential applications for stakeholders across the education sector. Finally, key datasets, especially supranational ones, suffer from delayed reporting, missing data, or insufficient granularity for more nuanced policy analysis. The fragmented nature of the ISM data infrastructure highlights the need for actionable changes in policy and practice to enhance ISM data collection, interoperability, accessibility, and sharing while fostering international collaboration.

### 3. Current ISM data landscape

There are different ISM datasets available at supranational, national, and institutional levels that guide research, policy, and practice around the globe. However, each of these data sources suffers from different types of limitations, which demand the attention of policymakers.



### 3.1. Supranational datasets

These datasets include sources such as UNESCO Institute for Statistics, OECD International Student Mobility Indicator, EUROSTAT Learning Mobility Statistics (including degree and credit mobility student numbers) and ERASMUS+ data. Supranational data collection, especially the joint UNESCO-OECD-EUROSTAT (UOE) dataset, provides a comprehensive, comparative view of global trends in international student mobility. These datasets inform governments and higher education institutions on how international education is evolving across regions and over time, helping to shape strategies that enhance cross-border education initiatives.

However, the lack of granularity and timeliness of this most-used dataset limits its effective application for real-time policy interventions. Supranational mobility data often has a time lag of at least 2-3 years in reporting until key hosting countries, if not all, have submitted their national datasets. The ISM datasets also lack critical details needed for effective policy interventions targeting different groups of ISM students, such as education level, fields of study or funding sources of mobile students or hosting institutions. In addition, differences in how countries define and report 'international/foreign students' (e.g., by residence/nationality/citizenship or by place of prior education) and 'mobility' (inclusion or exclusion of credit mobility) still exist, leading to inconsistent comparisons and a misinterpretation of trends. (e.g. using ERASMUS+ data for trend analysis of degree mobility or using UOE data for trend analysis of credit mobility). Another important problem in supranational datasets is related to the inclusion or exclusion of university-age migrant data in the ISM datasets. Different countries report different types of mobile individuals (not necessarily mobility for "study" purpose) under one conflated ISM type. The most striking example is conflating refugees and migrants as regular degree-seeking international students, which not only distorts the ISM statistics but also challenges the management of ISM at the national and institutional levels because these students may show up with different documentation and require different means of support throughout their enrolment and learning processes. Finally, there is limited data coverage of students hosted by developing countries and emerging regional hubs with weaker or less transparent education data-gathering capacity, resulting in data gaps in the global picture.

### 3.2. National data sources

Countries such as the United States, Germany, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Türkiye provide national ISM and related data through annual survey reports (e.g. IIE's Open Doors, and DAAD/DZHW's Wissenschaft weltoffen series) or national data portals (e.g. Australia's Dept of Ed - International Education Data and Research & Canada: Open Government Portal). Open access to ISM data not only promotes transparency, supports informed policymaking, and fosters research and innovation, but also enhances the reputation of the receiving education destinations; it contributes to economic planning, and facilitates global collaboration by enabling timely international comparisons of selected country pairs/groups.

National ISM datasets suffer from limited comparability due to differing definitions (e.g. 'foreign student' can be defined by nationality, residence or prior education qualification, 'year' can be defined by academic or financial year, 'mobility' can be defined by instance, headcount, full-time-equivalent, etc.) and methodologies, along with varying levels of detail and accessibility across countries. Additionally, these datasets often have data gaps, especially in less developed regions, making them less useful for global comparisons.

### 3.3. Proprietary data

Private entities such as StudyPortals and i-Graduate provide detailed market-driven insights of prospective mobile students or mobile graduates, often offering more frequent updates and targeted/customized analysis. However, these datasets are typically restricted by paywalls, may contain commercial bias and lack comparability with public data sources, limiting wider accessibility and neutrality.



### 3.4. Contextual data

Contextual data from EURYDICE, the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER), the European Higher Education Sector Observatory (EHESO, under construction, to incorporate various European data initiatives such as U-Multirank and ETER), and the UNESCO-IAU World Higher Education Database (WHED) provide system- and institutional-level data crucial for aiding the interpretation of ISM data. Since ISM is a highly contextualized phenomenon, the interpretation of the data must be done in light of national higher education contexts (e.g. size of the education system, public or private nature of the institutions) and national policies (e.g. internationalization policies, tuition fees, and visa policies) to generate any useful relevant insights. However, these different contextual sources face similar challenges of information fragmentation and the lack of data interoperability despite long-standing efforts to create comparable data with standardized data collection guides or to create a 'global unique ID' for institutions. The ambition to collect comprehensive, comparable, and disaggregated data, while being commendable, may backfire and result in data gaps due to the immense data reporting burden and the lack of subscription by institutions or national actors.

## 4. Recent developments related to student mobility data

### 4.1. European Mobility Data Space (EMDS)

The European Commission aims to establish a European Mobility Data Space, in order to pool and share 'mobility data' across sectors. This initiative will facilitate the integration of fragmented data systems and enhance real-time data access and sharing, including authorized confidential data while ensuring data sovereignty. While this initiative will potentially benefit policymakers, institutions, and individuals, such as tourists, by improving the efficiency and availability of data across Europe, it does not seem to foresee the inclusion of mobile students or staff in the education sector. Other European Data Spaces for cultural heritage or research and innovation have also been established, but there remains a lack of a Data Space for student mobility data despite the many EU-funded data initiatives dealing with mobile student data.

### 4.2. European Student Card Initiative (ESCI)

The European Student Card, the Erasmus+ App and the Erasmus Without Paper initiative simplify and streamline student mobility across Europe by digitizing services, administrative tasks, and institutional coordination for Erasmus+ exchanges. By the end of 2025, ESCI is expected to provide a simplified digital infrastructure for inter-institutional and learning agreements, including training, testing of nominations and transcripts, and a roll-out plan for the widespread use of digital documents. It can potentially reduce the administrative burden and increase the accuracy of student mobility data collection, subject to GDPR regulations.

### 4.3. Ambitious EU mobility targets

By 2030, the EU aims to increase learning mobility to at least 23% of higher education graduates and 12% of vocational education and training (VET) learners, with a focus on increasing the participation of disadvantaged groups (20%). These targets, together with the ambitious European Universities Initiative (64 European Universities Alliances involving 560 HEIs), underline the need for more comprehensive and easily accessible ISM data, both from within and outside the EU.



## 5. Recommendations

### 01 | For (supra)national agencies

At the supranational level lead actors such as UIS, OECD, EUROSTAT, IAU, EHESO, European Digital Education Hub's Interoperability Working Group led by DAAD, KIC, ENIS, EUF, EAIE, ACA, and national education promotion and admission agencies (e.g. DAAD), FOR-EU4All as well as proprietary student data holders (e.g. StudyPortals, DreamApply, i-graduate) need to establish a dedicated ISM Data Space, drawing reference to the European Mobility Data Space framework, to facilitate secure and seamless cross-border data sharing within a decentralized structure. Each participating institution would have sovereignty over their data and can decide with whom to share it depending on the level of trust. As opposed to a data portal, the data space allows for various levels of openness in the data – some data is restricted and can be used by only certain stakeholders, which is an essential functionality with the handling of confidential ISM personal data in compliance with GDPR. While the sharing of a data space does not guarantee in-depth data accessibility across the board, and the issue of comparability may continue to exist without the adoption of common definitions, it will significantly reduce the time for searching and finding different data sources related to ISM. These datasets may later be linked or even harmonized with additional efforts.

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

i. Support the European Student Card Initiative (ESCI)

The European Commission, Erasmus+, European Universities Alliances, and European universities networks need to promote the adoption and integration of ESCI by the majority, if not all, institutions across Europe to enable fully digitized processes for student mobility agreements and records in the coming years. This will include harmonizing or interfacing with institutions' existing mobility management systems and training stakeholders in the effective use of the new European system as a replacement or addition to their existing systems. A semantic model of the ISM and related data definitions may need to be developed to enable deep and comprehensive integration of European, national, and institutional systems, particularly in established and decentralized higher education systems.

ii. Harmonize ISM data collection between EU and non-EU countries

The European Commission (DG Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, DG Digital Services) in consultation with mobility data holders and higher education/mobility data experts need to work with competent ministries of non-EU countries to harmonize ISM data definitions and data collection methods, drawing on the experiences and expertise of the EU's ISM data collection and data quality assurance practices that have already gained significant ground in the European Higher Education Area. The data collection experiences and standards could contribute to the improvement of global ISM data comparability and facilitate the achievement of EU student mobility objectives, particularly the Global Gateway initiative and the external dimension of ERASMUS+ and European Universities Alliances, all of which would benefit from better ISM data from non-EU/EHEA countries.

### 03 | For national agencies and governments

At national and institutional levels, higher education institutions, NGOs and national agencies in charge of international education-related matters need to raise awareness and provide training on how to interpret and use ISM data critically. They need to ensure that stakeholders are equipped with basic skills to use ISM data tools and online data platforms, as well as provide basic ISM data definitions and data interpretation pitfalls for effective policy development and institutional planning. Given the growing complexity of ISM data definitions and terminology in



line with the diversification of the mobile student body mentioned above, staff training for the above-mentioned organizations should also be provided on a regular level to raise their awareness of the nuances of seemingly simple but conflated and confused definitions with far-reaching impacts on policy and management decisions. Moreover, national-level data providers should be actively involved in defining different types of ISM and associated terminology given their contextual knowledge on the ground.

### ISM Data sources:

Australian Government Department of Education International Education Data and Research: <https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research>

DAAD/DZHW Wissenschaft weltoffen: <https://www.wissenschaft-weltoffen.de/en/data/>

EHESO: <https://eter-project.com/data/>

ERASMUS+ Statistics: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/statistics-and-factsheets>

EUROSTAT: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/education-and-training/database>

EUROSTUDENT: <https://database.eurostudent.eu/>

EURYDICE: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/data-and-visuals>

Government of Canada Open Government Portal:

<https://search.open.canada.ca/opendata/?organization=cic>

IAU World Higher Education Database (WHED): <https://www.iau-aiu.net/World-Higher-Education-Database-WHED>

i-Graduate: <https://etioglobal.org/performance-benchmarking/international-student-barometer>

IIE Open Doors: <https://opendoorsdata.org/>

OECD: <https://www.oecd.org/en/data.html>

StudyPortals: <https://studyportals.com/intelligence/>

UIS: <https://data.uis.unesco.org/>

UK UCAS: <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis>

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