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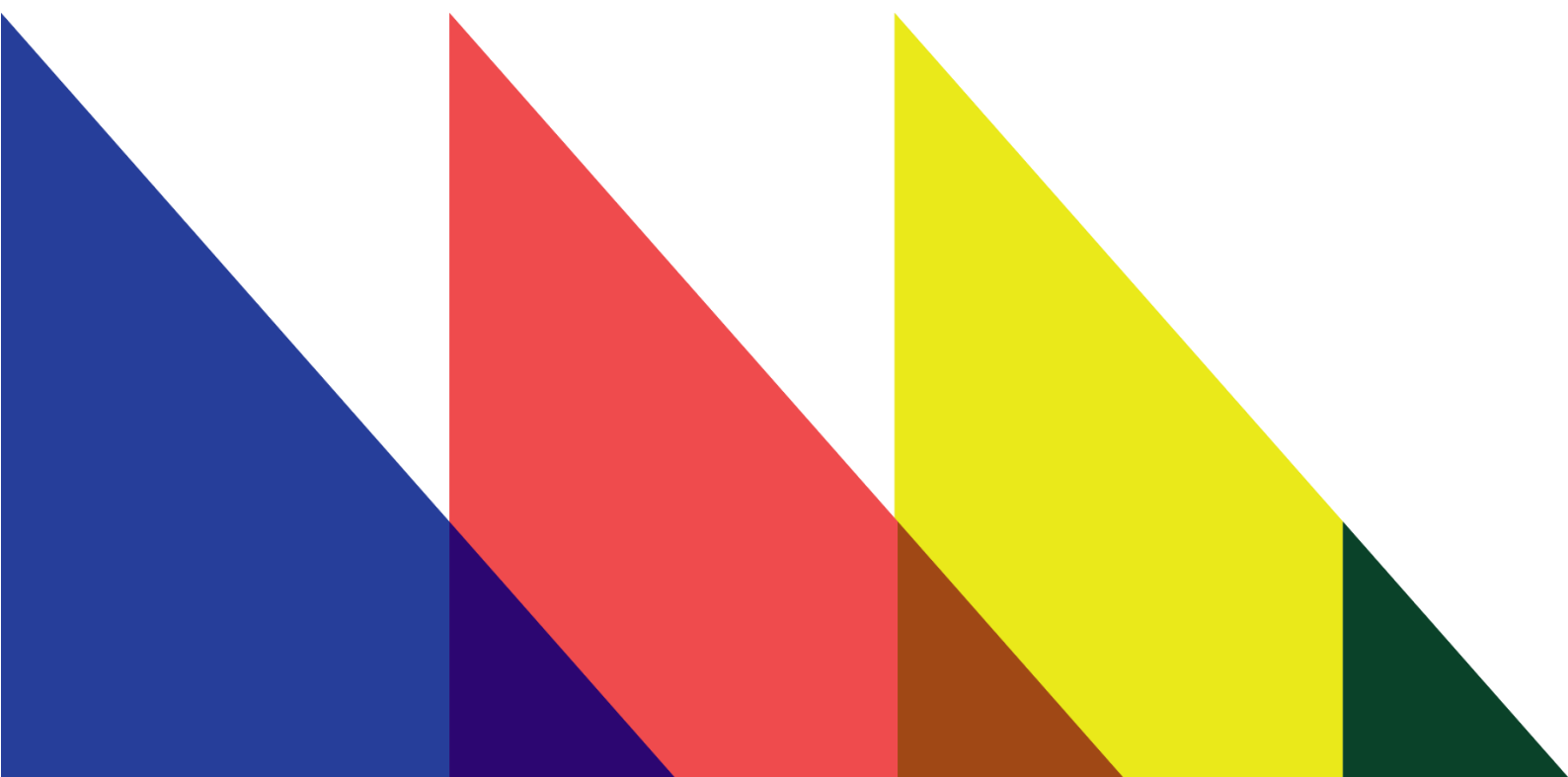


European Network on International Student Mobility  
**Connecting Research and Practice**

**Tackling social inequalities in  
international student mobility during  
global health crises**

**ENIS Policy Brief 04/2024**

22 October 2024





## 1. Snapshot overview

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted both higher education and international student mobility. International students were affected economically, socially and psychologically by the pandemic. These exceptional circumstances raised considerable research interest across different disciplines on **the effects of this global health crisis on social inequalities in international student mobility** (for an overview, please see [1]). While the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been well documented in the research literature, there is a lack of concrete recommendations on how to support international students in crisis situations that can be taken into account in the design of student mobility programmes.

Given this backdrop, this policy brief aims to provide **recommendations for policy and practice** on how to respond to the **challenges and hardships experienced by international students in health crisis situations**, with an emphasis on the social inequalities. These practical recommendations are based on a systematic literature review [1] of 48 empirical studies published between January 2020 and June 2022 on the impact of Covid-19 on social inequalities in international student mobility at different levels (*individual, institutional and country*) throughout the study abroad cycle (*before, during and after the mobility*).

## 2. Background

The literature review [1] indicates a **shift in research interest** since the outbreak of Covid-19, which mirrors the concerns of public opinion and academic institutions. While the focus before the pandemic was on equity of access to international mobility opportunities, interest has grown in looking into students' **lived experience** of inequalities, especially among degree-seeking students coming from Asian countries, particularly China. Consequently, the period in the host country received increasing attention compared to the phases before and after the mobility experience, because this was the phase most disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The most frequent destination countries examined in the literature are the United States, Australia and the UK. This shift in research focus from inequalities in accessing international mobility opportunities to the lived experiences of international students underlines the importance of **paying attention to individual experiences and inequalities in the host country**.

Moreover, there is a need to better understand the role of **national and institutional policies and practices** in producing social inequalities in international student mobility. Based on the empirical findings from the review, we formulate **four recommendations** for the European Commission, national authorities, national agencies, higher education institutions and relevant institutional stakeholders. We highlight key priority areas that need to be addressed in order to take into account the unique needs of international students in health crisis situations. These recommendations may also be of interest to researchers, who can refer to the systematic literature review [1] for suggestions on future research directions.



### 3. Key findings

In this policy brief, we focus on the lived experiences of international students, taking into account how social inequalities shape their experiences according to literature on the impact of Covid-19 on international student mobility [1]. The three **most common areas** where social inequalities are observed at the individual level are (1) Mental health, psychological distress and/or wellbeing, (2) Experiences of exclusion and racism, and (3) Financial vulnerability. The most common dimensions of social inequality identified at the institutional level relate to (4) Institutional support services, and at the national level (5) Governmental policies and public perceptions in light of Covid-19.

#### 3.1 Mental health, psychological distress and/or wellbeing

The stress and fear induced by the pandemic had negative effects on students' mental health, especially for Asian international students who appear to have experienced xenophobic mistreatment. While mental health issues and symptoms increased in general during the pandemic, international students seemed to be a higher risk group compared to local students. Their vulnerability to psychological distress was caused not only by their lack of social bonds and resources compared to other students but also because in some cases they were beyond the remit of the governmental protection offered by the countries they were studying in.

#### 3.2 Experiences of exclusion and racism

Inequality of treatment occurred through racial discrimination and xenophobic behaviour, broader social and economic hardships, financial vulnerability, and lower levels of psychosocial adjustment. Experiences of exclusion and racism also overlapped with other dimensions of social inequality, such as ethnicity and nationality, often being the cause of the poor mental health of international students. This was particularly evident among Asian students, and Chinese students in particular. Furthermore, the vulnerability of this student population comes to replace the pre-pandemic perception of international students not only as a homogenous group, but also as a mobile elite.

#### 3.3 Financial vulnerability

The pandemic added to the financial vulnerability of international students, exposing them to different forms of economic precarity, including financial hardships arising from travel restrictions as well as insecurity about work or precarious jobs, especially due to insufficient governmental support. Studies show that the lack of safeguarding citizenship rights of international students in host countries, along with their exclusion from pandemic-related financial aid initiatives offered by host governments, made their economic situation worse.

#### 3.4 Institutional support services

The official response of higher education institutions towards international students during the pandemic and the support services offered to them were diverse but generally developed with a one-size-fits-all model and therefore proved insufficient. Institutions offered practical distance counselling to students on health matters, travel-related information and some financial resources for those students facing financial difficulties. Common forms of support included psychological and financial support, living arrangements, quarantine and online



mentoring and remote emergency teaching, highlighting efforts towards a personalised and empathic approach.

### 3.5 Governmental policies and public perceptions of international students

Governmental emergency policies in response to Covid-19 fell short of addressing the unique needs of international students, who often did not have the same access to societal services as their domestic peers. Governmental policymaking, which is often geared towards national interests, needs to take this aspect into account as well as the fact that public perceptions of international students tend to be negative, as often was the case in Covid-19 given the anti-Chinese sentiment and prejudiced attitudes towards Asian students as spreaders of the virus.

## 4. Recommendations

### 01 | For the European Commission

To establish more efficient response channels for health crisis situations and give more attention to students' lived experiences of inequalities in host countries in policy making.

- The Covid-19 pandemic exposed significant bureaucratic obstacles in higher education institutions that delayed access to essential resources, despite the force majeure clause. To address this issue, the Commission should **streamline its communication processes** with national agencies, ensuring a faster and more effective crisis response.
- Evidence shows that the Covid-19 pandemic added to the already complex social inequalities among international students. A more qualitative understanding of students' lived experiences of inequalities in host countries is crucial to understanding how specific international student groups might be disadvantaged by their situation and background. We therefore encourage the Commission to **include qualitative benchmarks** in policy making in combination to quantitative ones.

### 02 | For national authorities

To ensure alignment between national policies and institutional practices, by clarifying who is responsible for supporting international students and to which extent.

- National policies need to be reviewed as potentially exclusionary regarding international students. In the case of health crises, national authorities should **extend their emergency measures** to international students. This includes ensuring access to the national healthcare system and other welfare benefits that recognise international students as a heterogeneous group with varying needs and ensures their foreign-national status does not hinder their access to societal services in the host country. Specific attention should be paid to the responsibility of national authorities in ensuring effective crisis communication, which might help prevent minority



groups like international students being blamed for the crisis situation. This is particularly important in light of evidence from the review [1] on which this policy brief is based that suggests a link between social exclusion and the poor mental health of international students, as well as financial precarity and lack of access to financial welfare provisions.

### 03 | For national agencies

To make informed decisions based on independent evidence and act as intermediary points between governments and higher education institutions.

- National agencies should establish **clear guidelines** for supporting higher education institutions during emergencies, with a dedicated response plan that includes a step-by-step guide for safeguarding student well-being. This plan should encompass updated mitigation strategies that anticipate various crisis scenarios, such as environmental disasters, political instability, and health crises, detailing appropriate measures to ensure the safety of international students. Communication flow should be efficient and clear, ensuring that higher education institutions know exactly whom to contact in various situations.

### 04 | For higher education institutions

To ensure institutional support services effectively cater to all students in crisis situations, including in health crises.

- In crisis situations, **institutional student services** are extremely important, since student access to social support might be hindered. These services range from academic support or advice, to housing, psychological counselling, career guidance, sports and health facilities, and socio-cultural activities [2]. Higher education institutions should ensure that their student services can readily adapt to any emergency situation, taking into account students' specific needs related to ethnicity, religion, gender orientation, sexual identity, disabilities, and economic circumstances.
- Given the adverse psychological impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the well-being and mental health of international students, higher education institutions should have measures in place to expand **mental health services during crisis situations**, offering counselling, stress management workshops, and online support groups, tailored to the diverse needs of international students. The provision of **psychological support in multiple languages** is also crucial to address the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the student body effectively.
- In response to the pandemic, many higher education institutions provided logistical support, including visa and quarantine advice. Moving forward, it is vital for these institutions to prepare for future disruptions by developing detailed **mitigation plans**



that cover various dimensions such as housing, food, healthcare, and social spaces. These plans should include partnerships with local actors to ensure comprehensive support and secure commitments to provide assistance when needed.

- The demand for effective remote teaching in order to overcome the digital divide and ensure universal student access was also noted. Higher education institutions should **improve digital learning platforms, offer training on online learning practices** for students and faculty, and **ensure students have necessary infrastructure**, like computers and working spaces to pursue their studies without hindrance.
- Finally, the economic implications of the pandemic negatively affected students' financial situation and ability to afford their studies abroad. We encourage higher education institutions **to strengthen the availability of scholarships, emergency funds, and flexible payment plans**. Also, reducing fees for online courses and providing financial advice services tailored to international students' needs are recommended during challenging times.

## 5. References

- 01** | Almeida et al. (forthcoming). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on social inequalities in international student mobility: A systematic literature review. [Under review at Comparative Migration Studies]
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<sup>1</sup> The authors of the policy brief are listed in this section. It should be recognised that this policy brief is largely based on the results of "The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on social inequalities in international student mobility: A systematic literature review", whose authors are: Joana Almeida, Nicolai Netz, David Nika, Ewa Krzaklewska, Joyce Aguiar, Alina Botezat, Thais França, Suvi Jokila, Bernhard Streitwieser, Runa Guðmarsdóttir and Daniel Malet Calvo

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## Policy Brief



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