

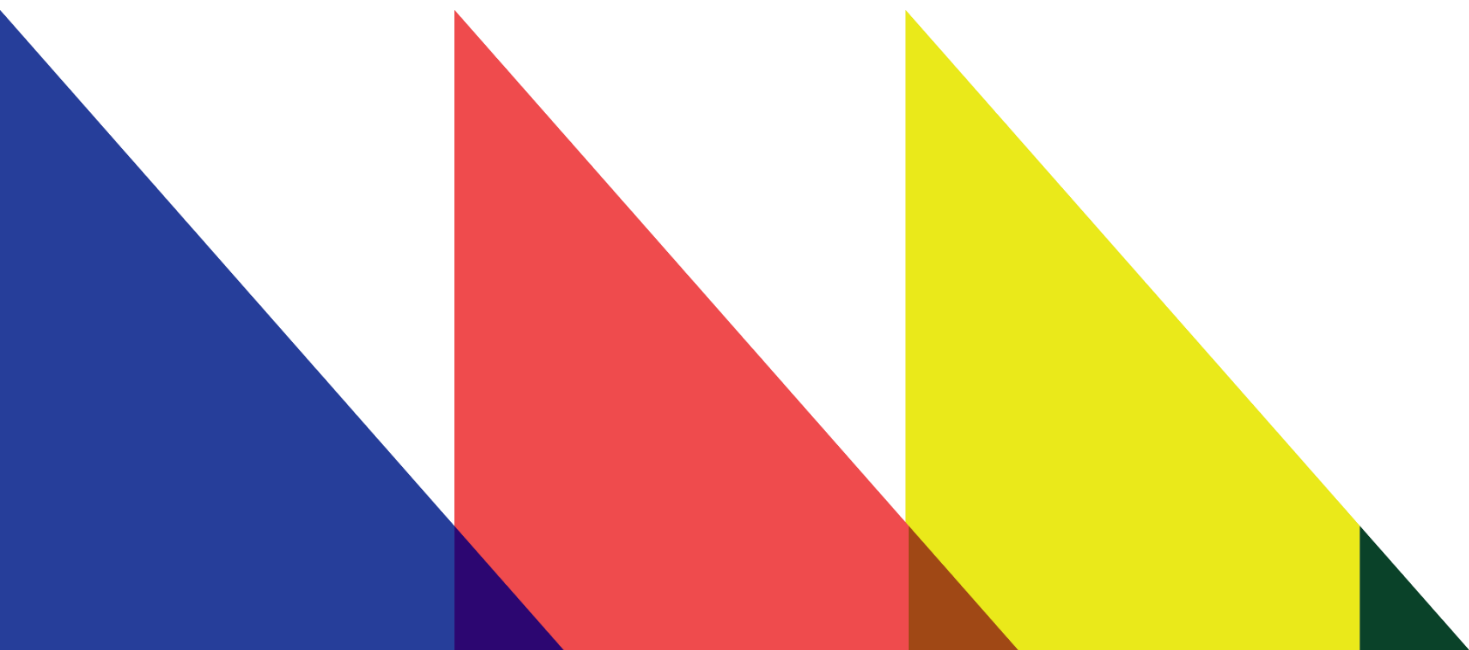


European Network on International Student Mobility
Connecting Research and Practice

**Enhancing international student mobility in Europe
through harmonisation of visa policies**

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1. Snapshot overview

Different visa procedures, administrative obstacles, and complex requirements make it difficult especially for third-country students¹ to access higher education in Europe. European countries' visa policies are often restrictive and incoherent, hindering and limiting international student mobility (ISM). In this policy brief, the term "visa" is used broadly to include both entry visas and residence permits, recognising that requirements and procedures vary across countries within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This policy brief analyses how differences in visa policies across European countries that are part of the EHEA influence ISM.

While the policy brief focuses on degree mobility, it acknowledges that students may also undertake credit mobility during their studies, within or beyond Europe. Therefore, it also considers students' rights related to credit mobility.

Harmonising visa procedures, expediting their processing, and allowing longer post-graduation stays are some crucial steps to strengthen the competitiveness of the EHEA and contribute to positioning Europe as a global knowledge hub. If well promoted and managed, ISM can hence become a key pillar for Europe's economic growth and competitiveness. This policy brief provides recommendations for improving the visa system by establishing common criteria for issuing student visas, and coordination between countries.

2. Background

Given recent population growth and labour market challenges, the EU and its member states must consider migration as a means to address ageing populations, sustain welfare systems, and attract skilled workers (1). Facilitating ISM, as well as securing the retention of international students as qualified workers after their graduation, is key to making European higher education attractive and competitive, which is in line with the objectives of the Bologna Declaration (2). In different communications (2, 3), the European Commission underlines the importance of facilitating the entrance of third-country nationals for educational purposes, as well as their post-graduation retention.

Indeed, national and European policies may either support or constrain migration, and international students are susceptible to the effects of the migration policies of the host country (4). Moreover, visa challenges have been shown to dissuade prospective international students and significantly hinder ISM (5). In fact, more than half of international students globally report that restrictive policies and/or problems obtaining a visa are among the main obstacles in engaging in ISM (5).

At the EU level, multiple policies and initiatives highlight the need for member states to enhance collaboration and streamline visa processes for third-country nationals seeking educational opportunities in the EU (3). Member states are hence encouraged to optimise visa and residence permit processes for third-country nationals coming to the EU for education and research, promote the EU as a study destination through projects like "Study in Europe",

¹ Nationals from a country that is not a member of the European Union as well as a country or territory whose citizens do not enjoy the European Union right to free movement (EU member states, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland)
https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/third-country_en

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and allow part-time work (for at least 15 hours per week) for third-country students (2). Additionally, post-study opportunities should be more actively promoted by permitting students to stay for at least nine months post-graduation to seek employment or entrepreneurship opportunities. Furthermore, it is important to reduce administrative burdens and support intra-EU mobility for researchers and students (2).

While effects of ISM may not be immediately visible, the integration of mobile students into educational systems and labour markets contributes to knowledge creation, innovation, and economic performance. Enhanced cross-border mobility for highly trained individuals creates a very much needed boost in human capital in Europe, creating a fertile ground for substantial long-term benefits. However, such potential is undermined by structural inequalities in access to mobility opportunities. Students from different parts of the world face unequal costs when applying for study visas, with those from the Global South paying significantly more compared to their peers from the Global North (7).

Methodology

To develop clear and actionable recommendations on visa processes, members of the ENIS Working Group 5 examined the main barriers faced by third country students in the visa application process and explored how these might be addressed to promote more equitable access to higher education in Europe, while maintaining national and regional security standards. Through case studies, the analysis focused on how visa regulations, requirements, costs and processing times differ across European countries, and how such differences impact ISM. This exercise was conducted through analysis of visa-related information and documents available online.

The case studies covered four EU countries (Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Romania), an EU candidate country (Bosnia and Herzegovina), an EEA-member (Norway), and a non-EU/EEA country (UK). These countries were selected to reflect the diversity of systems governing access and post-graduation opportunities for third-country students. The case study authors are experienced ISM practitioners and researchers and adopted a role-playing approach to simulate the perspective of a prospective student from a third-country. This approach enabled them to identify and document the same types of obstacles and uncertainties a real student would encounter when seeking guidance on visa processes.

3. Key findings

The analysis of visa policies across the selected European countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, and the UK – reveals several critical dimensions concerning ISM.

3.1. Variation in visa policies and processes in Europe

The case studies indicate that there is a significant procedural divergence across European visa frameworks, which creates a fragmented landscape that prospective international students are expected to navigate. While countries like the Netherlands employ a streamlined process, in which educational institutions directly manage visa applications (functioning as recognised sponsors), other countries like Portugal, Romania, or Bosnia and Herzegovina, maintain systems requiring students to independently engage with embassies, resulting in inconsistent application experiences. The documentary requirements also appear to vary significantly – ranging from Norway's straightforward verification of financial means and admission letters to Romania's more extensive demands, including criminal record certificates

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and accommodation proof. Germany and the UK similarly require extensive documentation including financial proof, health insurance, and language proficiency verification. While intended to ensure that all students have the necessary conditions to stay and study in the host country, these requirements, particularly proof of accommodation, can create difficulties for students unfamiliar with the local housing market, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds or without local contacts, often leading to delays or further complicating the visa process. Findings also show that not all countries bound by EU Directive 2016/801 have implemented the intra-EU mobility rights for third country nationals enrolled in degree programmes.

3.2. Processing inefficiencies and delays

Some disparities were identified in visa processing timeframes, which significantly impact planning and preparation for mobility. Processing periods range from as little as 15-60 days in Romania, while the Netherlands usually provides decisions within 60 days. In Portugal, visa processing times may surpass three months. Germany presents particular challenges as processing can take several months, without definitive timeframes, and Norway potentially extends processing up to seven months if applications are not submitted by specific deadlines. The UK and Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate more predictable timelines, with processing typically completed within 3-8 weeks and 2-4 weeks respectively, though delays remain possible. Extended waiting periods may constitute a significant deterrent for prospective students who require predictable timelines for academic and personal planning. Furthermore, international students from third countries often face significant logistical burdens and delays in processing when required to apply for study visas at embassies located far from their place of residence. In countries with limited or no EU diplomatic presence, like some regions in Sub-Saharan Africa or Central Asia, students may need to travel across borders, leading to substantial costs and delays. A concrete example is Guinea, where students applying for a study visa to Portugal were required to travel to Dakar, in Senegal, due to the absence of a consular section processing student visas in Guinea.

3.3. Visa costs and financial (in)accessibility

The financial burden of visa applications also varies substantially across the examined countries, creating economic barriers to mobility. The UK imposes the highest costs amongst the countries analysed, at approximately €600 for a standard student visa, plus a substantial healthcare fee paid annually. Norway charges about €463 for visa processing. Compared to that, the Netherlands have a moderate fee of €243 and fees in Romania only range between €35-120, depending on bilateral agreements. These disparities are further complicated by differing requirements for proving financial self-sufficiency during study periods, with some countries requiring specific monthly minimums (e.g. Portugal, Romania) or even blocked bank accounts (e.g. Germany). This raises concerns about the reproduction of inequalities in ISM. Due to such high and disparate costs of visa processing, students from less affluent backgrounds may be dissuaded from applying.

3.4. Information accessibility and clarity

The exercise of assessing the clarity and accessibility of visa information in different countries revealed that, while some countries fare better than others, overall information is often difficult to find, scattered around different sources and, in some cases, even contradictory. Erasmus Mundus students, particularly those from third countries, face significant hurdles navigating complex, inconsistent, and unclear visa application processes across multiple countries (6). Non-functional web links are also common, which renders the task of obtaining basic information about visas and the application process a rather challenging task. This



information gap may affect students from regions with limited consular representation even more since, in the absence of clear online information, the possibility of acquiring information directly from official sources is limited.

3.5. Family reunification provisions

The case study analysis also highlights differences in family reunification policies that affect students' personal well-being and mobility decisions. While some countries have more flexible policies when it comes to the inclusion of family members in the visa process, overall, this is often not an easily accessible opportunity, which can dissuade students with families from choosing certain countries. Norway and the Netherlands explicitly permit spouses and children to accompany international students, for whom a separate application is required, while countries like the UK may allow dependents only under specific circumstances (e.g. studying a postgraduate course lasting 9 months or longer). This is a key aspect for ISM promotion at national and European levels, as family reunification provisions significantly influence destination choices, particularly for older students or those with family obligations.

3.6. Right to work during studies

The analysis of work permits during studies reveals inconsistent approaches to balancing academic tasks and financial needs. The Netherlands offers students the right to work part-time (up to 16 hours weekly) and to work full-time during academic break periods. Self-employment is also permitted. Norway allows 20 hours of weekly employment, full-time during holidays, but prohibits self-employment. Similar 20-hour restrictions exist in Portugal, Romania, and the UK, although with varying eligibility requirements. The case studies indicate that work restrictions create particular hardships for students without external financial support, potentially undermining the continuation and completion of their studies.

3.7. Post-graduation retention measures

Our analysis reveals considerable variation in post-graduation rights, which can significantly impact the attractiveness of certain destinations for prospective international students. While the UK currently offers a relatively generous graduate visa pathway of 2 or even 3 years after graduation, depending on the higher education degree, recent policy proposals suggest reducing this to 18 months. Norway and the Netherlands provide a one-year residence permit for job seekers, whereas Romania allows only 9 months for graduates to look for employment; Portugal maintains even more restrictive post-graduation residency rights, only 120 days. These differences influence the capacity of European countries to attract and retain talent. Often countries with more generous post-graduation schemes will enjoy greater appeal among prospective international students.

4. Recommendations

01 | For the European Commission and associated agencies

The European Commission should **prioritise the enforcement of Directive 2016/801** by increasing oversight and requiring member states to publish transparent data on visa processing times, mobility support, and work rights. Enforcing this directive will also contribute to implementing intra-EU mobility rights for third country nationals. Strengthening compliance with the existing legal framework would significantly reduce student mobility barriers without the need for additional legislation.



02 | For governments and policymakers

National authorities should explore implementing a **risk-based fast-track visa** mechanism for specific study visa applications that prioritise government-sponsored scholars or applicants in strategic study domains aligned with national and European objectives. This approach would streamline low-risk cases, ensuring timely access to education while safeguarding national security.

03 | For governments and policymakers

Governments should consider **legally enforcing a maximum processing time for all student visa applications** – ideally 60 days – to ensure timely and equitable access to ISM. Persistent delays and bureaucratic inefficiencies risk undermining the reputation of individual countries and Europe in general as appealing ISM destinations. To support this, member states could **centralise and simplify all visa-related information through a single, accessible platform**. This online platform for handling study visa applications could integrate AI-powered tools for preliminary document verification, fraud detection, and real-time chatbot support, all under robust human oversight. Remedial mechanisms or procedures should also be in place for students facing undue delays or errors in the application process. A platform that aggregates all relevant information would also eliminate the need for applicants to search across multiple, often inconsistent sources. In most of the countries analysed, excessive paperwork, unclear documentation requirements and inconsistent instructions (e.g. on national immigration websites and consular services) remain a barrier.

04 | For governments and policymakers

To address consular coverage gaps and improve visa processing timeframes, governments should explore **formalising agreements that allow shared visa processing in third countries**. When a particular EU member state lacks an embassy or consulate in a given country, applicants should be permitted to submit their study visa applications through the embassy of another EU country. This cooperative approach would reduce long-distance travel for visa application purposes, lower costs for applicants and enhance procedural efficiency.

05 | For the European Commission, governments and policymakers

To reduce the organisational and financial burden of visa applications in multiple European countries, a **multi-country student visa** should be considered for third country applicants in various integrated programmes such as European degrees or Erasmus Mundus. This dedicated visa would facilitate mobility between participating institutions across EHEA or European alliances.

06 | For governments and policymakers

To foster a more welcoming and supportive environment for international students, European countries should **streamline visa processes not only for students but also for their immediate family members**, including spouses and dependent children. Wherever possible, family visa applications should be processed in coordination with the students' application to



ensure timely and simultaneous approval. This is essential for promoting student well-being, long-term settlement, and talent retention.

07 | For governments and policymakers

In line with EU legislation and national labour market strategies, governments should **extend post-graduation stay rights for third country graduates**, allowing them to remain for at least 12 months to seek employment. Facilitating access to employment in sectors that require highly skilled professionals would ensure Europe remains an attractive destination for global talent while addressing domestic workforce needs.

08 | For higher education institutions

Higher education institutions should strengthen their **role in supporting international students before their arrival**. This could involve assigning personnel or units to assist with visa-related queries, and, where possible, to coordinate with embassies to reduce the likelihood of rejections. Institutions should also ensure that students receive clear and timely information about visa requirements, residence permits, municipal registration, and practical matters such as accommodation. Investing in these forms of structured support, adapted to institutional capacity, can substantially improve students' experiences and reinforce the institution's appeal to prospective international applicants.

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