

Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility through Volunteering

Publication Report



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ECEM Enriching Communities
Through Engaged Mobilities

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Introduction to the ECEM Project and the Publication

The [Enriching Communities through Engaged Mobilities \(ECEM\)](#) is an Erasmus+ project which strives to design measures to increase students' participation in civic engagement initiatives by building connections with Higher Education Institutions and Civil Society Organisations.

Therefore, the aim of the ECEM project is to:

- Increase the civic engagement component of mobilities in the field of internationalisation of Higher Education by making interaction with local communities the norm in mobilities.
- Ensure recognition of learning outcomes for participants that take part in civic engagement initiatives.
- Improve the collaboration frameworks between Higher Education Institutions and other societal actors to make mobilities contribute to societal change and common European values.

In line with the project objectives, this Publication has been prepared, aiming to bridge the theoretical concepts related to active citizenship and sense of belonging, and the needs for access and support for students to actively participate and contribute to their local community while on exchange.

The Publication is a result of a combination of various methods, such as extensive desk research aiming to identify the importance of active citizenship in inclusion, a focus group with students from various backgrounds, as well as analysis of student data on access needs to engagement and integration on exchange and institutional survey for university staff with a focus on inclusion and integration measures. The results of this research is presented in this publication, exploring the correlation between community engagement, active citizenship and integration of international students. Based on this research, the Publication outlines recommendations for improved models of integration and civic engagement in student mobility.

Introduction to Key Terms and Concepts

The first chapter of this Publication presents the results of the Desk Research developed as part of the ECEM project. It is a comprehensive exploration of the intersection between active citizenship and a sense of belonging within the context of short-term student mobility programmes. It synthesises outputs from related work packages and highlights the potential for civic engagement to significantly improve student experiences during mobility and beyond. The ultimate goal is to influence education policies at European, national, and institutional levels by emphasizing inclusive practices that foster integration, civic engagement, and belonging.

Importance of Active Citizenship in Student Mobility

The desk research defines **active citizenship** as proactive participation in societal and democratic processes, which includes volunteering, community engagement, and advocacy for social change. Within the context of student mobility, this concept takes on a unique role by fostering inclusion among diverse student groups and strengthening connections with host communities. The proactive engagement of students in their temporary environments not only enriches their personal experiences but also contributes to the social fabric of the host communities. Active citizenship acts as a unifying force, promoting a shared sense of responsibility and commitment to collective progress.

Sense of Belonging and Inclusion

One of the central themes of the report is the critical importance of fostering a sense of belonging among mobile students. **Belonging is defined as the feeling of security, inclusion, and shared identity within a group.** It is described as a cornerstone of effective integration, positively impacting students' engagement, motivation, well-being, and academic performance. Achieving a genuine sense of belonging requires intentional efforts from institutions, which must address students' social, emotional, and academic needs.

This publication draws on several sociological and psychological theories to explain the dynamics of belonging. These include:

- **Social Identity Theory:** Belonging arises from group membership, driving a sense of responsibility and shared identity.

- **Self-Determination Theory:** Emphasises the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to foster well-being and motivation.
- **Sense of Community Theory:** Focuses on the importance of shared values, mutual support, and collaboration in building group cohesion.

By fostering belonging, institutions can encourage students to actively participate in their communities, creating a mutually beneficial relationship between the students and the local environment.

Role of Service Learning

The concept of *service learning* is presented as a powerful tool for bridging academic learning with community engagement. Service learning involves structured activities where students engage in community service projects that address real-world needs while reflecting on their experiences to enhance their learning. This pedagogy is shown to enhance students' civic responsibility, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills. By combining academic goals with community service, service learning helps students connect with their host communities, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration.

Several **benefits of service learning** are highlighted, such as the fact that students gain practical experience and develop key skills like teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, communication benefits from students' contributions to addressing social challenges, and the enhancement of institutions' reputation as socially responsible and committed to student development.

Despite these advantages, we also acknowledge **barriers to the implementation of service learning**, such as resistance to curriculum changes, limited institutional support, and time constraints. Nevertheless, it emphasises the importance of overcoming these challenges to unlock the potential of service learning in higher education.

The increasing **recognition of community engagement** is a fundamental aspect of tertiary education. Institutions that actively engage with local stakeholders create opportunities for mutual benefit, addressing societal challenges while enriching students' learning experiences. Examples from universities, such as Colorado State University's integration of coursework with community-driven projects, illustrate successful models of community engagement. These programmes not only prepare students for the workforce but also contribute to the development of socially conscious citizens.

Institutions are encouraged to adopt community-engaged learning practices, providing structured support to students, community partners, and academic staff. This will lead to various benefits of community engaged-learning, such as

enhanced employability and professional skills for students, strengthened partnerships between universities and local communities and increased student satisfaction and retention.

Volunteering as a Pathway to Inclusion

Volunteering is presented as a vital component of active citizenship, particularly for mobility students. **Engaging in volunteer activities allows students to connect with their host communities**, develop new skills, and gain a deeper understanding of cultural and social dynamics. Volunteering opportunities range from environmental conservation projects to tutoring, mentoring, and participation in community health initiatives. These activities promote cross-cultural understanding, personal growth, and a stronger sense of belonging.

Impact of volunteering on individual students, institutions, and society at large:

- **Individual Impact:** Students develop leadership, teamwork, and communication skills while fostering empathy and social responsibility.
- **Institutional Impact:** Universities benefit from enhanced community partnerships, improved student satisfaction, and greater alignment with sustainability goals.
- **Global Impact:** Volunteering contributes to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by addressing issues such as poverty, education, and environmental sustainability.

The research did position **student mobility as a key driver of global citizenship and intercultural understanding**. By integrating principles of active citizenship and community engagement into mobility programmes, institutions can align their efforts with broader societal goals, such as promoting inclusion, sustainability, and social cohesion. This alignment underscores the transformative potential of education to address global challenges and create equitable, interconnected communities.

Theoretical Background

Community Engagement

Community engagement is presented in the desk research as a fundamental aspect of higher education, essential for fostering social responsibility, active citizenship, and inclusion. The integration of students into local communities through structured partnerships, collaborative initiatives, and experiential

learning opportunities is positioned as transformative. This approach creates a symbiotic relationship between institutions and society, where universities contribute to solving societal challenges while enhancing the learning experience of their students.

Higher education institutions benefit from community engagement by linking academic learning with practical applications. Through engaged learning, students gain real-world experiences that develop critical skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership. **Communities, in turn, benefit from the resources and expertise that universities provide**, addressing local challenges and promoting equity and sustainability. Students develop personally and professionally, gaining not only employability skills but also a deeper understanding of their roles as socially responsible citizens.

The desk research highlights the value of community-engaged learning as a method that combines academic rigor with practical problem-solving. Programmes such as those at Colorado State University demonstrate how research and service can be seamlessly integrated to address community needs. This model encourages students to connect their academic pursuits with real-world impact, supported by constant reflection and adaptive strategies.

For students, participation in community engagement fosters the development of critical skills and enhances their sense of purpose and belonging. It also provides opportunities to apply their knowledge in meaningful ways, helping them grow into informed and engaged citizens. For communities, collaboration with universities allows for addressing pressing needs, fostering inclusion, and supporting sustainable development. Institutions also gain significantly from these efforts, solidifying their role as socially responsible entities, building strong partnerships, and aligning their missions with global goals such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

While community engagement offers numerous benefits, the report identifies **challenges that institutions must overcome** to implement such initiatives effectively. These include inflexible curricula, resistance to institutional change, and a lack of support for faculty and students. The document emphasizes the need for a cultural shift within academia, prioritising engagement as a core element of higher education's mission.

Illustrative **examples of community engagement initiatives** include social innovation projects where students work with local organisations to address identified challenges. Volunteer programmes such as ALIVE at the University of Galway integrate skill-building with meaningful contributions to society. Thematic

engagement pathways, focusing on issues such as environmental sustainability, food security, and social justice, provide students with opportunities to apply academic knowledge to practical, impactful work.

The past research done by ECEM consortium stresses the **importance of institutional support for community engagement** through faculty and student training, development of partnerships with local organizations, and integration of civic engagement into academic curricula. Reflection and critical thinking are also noted as essential components of successful community-engaged learning.

To conclude, community engagement in higher education is presented as a powerful tool for fostering active citizenship and addressing societal challenges. By integrating engagement into their core mission, universities not only prepare students to become agents of positive change but also contribute to building inclusive, sustainable communities, aligning education with the broader needs of society.

From Belonging to Active Citizenship

The transition from a sense of belonging to active citizenship is a central theme that highlights how fostering a strong sense of inclusion within educational settings can inspire students to engage actively in their communities. At the heart of this process is the idea that when students feel included and accepted within a community, it lays the foundation for their involvement in broader societal and civic activities.

Belonging is identified as a critical psychological and social need that influences various aspects of a student's experience. The feeling of belonging encompasses security, support, and acceptance within a group, and it plays a fundamental role in student engagement and performance. Belonging is not just about personal comfort; it is tied to social and academic success. Students who experience a sense of belonging within their educational environments are more likely to engage deeply in their studies, feel motivated, and develop stronger interpersonal connections with peers, faculty, and their host communities. Furthermore, when students feel they belong, they are more likely to be motivated to contribute to the community's well-being and work toward common goals.

Belonging, while important in itself, is only the starting point. It sets the stage for the development of active citizenship, a concept that goes beyond mere membership in a community to include active participation in shaping and improving that community. **Active citizenship involves the responsibility of individuals to contribute to the public good**, whether through political processes,

community service, or advocacy for social change. Active citizens not only advocate for the rights of themselves and others, but also work toward enhancing social justice, equality, and sustainable development.

The shift from belonging to active citizenship is facilitated by the sense of connection students feel to their educational institution and the wider community. **When students feel supported and valued, their motivation to contribute to collective endeavors increases.** This sense of responsibility can drive students to become more involved in campus life, whether by participating in decision-making processes, joining community service initiatives, or engaging in social and environmental advocacy. **As students develop a strong sense of belonging, they are more likely to embrace their role in society and view themselves as agents of positive change.**

Several psychological and sociological theories help explain this progression from belonging to active citizenship. **Social Identity Theory** suggests that individuals form their self-concept based on their membership in social groups, and as students identify with their academic and local communities, they are more likely to engage in behaviors that benefit those communities. The theory posits that **when students feel they are part of a group, they are motivated to contribute to the well-being of that group,** reinforcing both their personal identity and their social responsibility. In the context of higher education, this means that a strong connection to the academic community can inspire students to become involved in initiatives that benefit both the university and the surrounding community.

Self-Determination Theory emphasises the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering personal motivation. This theory explains that **when students feel that they have control over their actions, are competent in their abilities, and have meaningful connections with others, they are more likely to engage in activities that align with their values, including civic engagement.** For instance, when students feel that their participation in community service or activism is meaningful and supported by their educational institution, they are more likely to continue their involvement and feel empowered to make a difference.

Sense of Community Theory further explains that belonging is not just an internal feeling of security; it also involves shared goals and mutual support within a community. **When students experience a sense of belonging, they also develop a sense of responsibility to contribute to the community's success.** This theory suggests that communities that foster a sense of shared identity and common purpose are more likely to inspire active citizenship among their members. Higher education institutions, by promoting inclusive environments where students feel

connected to one another and the broader academic community, are well-positioned to nurture the growth of active citizenship.

Educational institutions play a crucial role in facilitating the transition from belonging to active citizenship. Universities and colleges can act as incubators for active citizenship by creating environments that support and encourage civic engagement. Through programmes such as service learning, volunteering opportunities, internships, and student governance, institutions provide students with the tools, platforms, and experiences necessary for active participation. These initiatives help students connect their academic learning with real-world social challenges, enabling them to apply their knowledge while contributing to the improvement of their host communities.

Institutions are encouraged to be proactive in creating inclusive environments that encourage active citizenship. This can be achieved by supporting student participation in governance, offering volunteer and service-learning opportunities, and encouraging collaboration across diverse student groups. It is also important to **provide structures that allow students to reflect on their experiences and the impact of their contributions.** Reflection plays an important role in turning passive participation into active citizenship, as it allows students to internalise their experiences and recognise the broader implications of their actions.

Student representation and student partnership are also critical elements in this transition. While representation involves students advocating for the views of their peers to the institution, partnership goes further by encouraging collaboration between students and faculty to co-create policies, curricula, and programs. This participatory approach ensures that students feel empowered and that their voices are heard in institutional decision-making processes. Increasing student involvement in governance not only empowers students but also enhances their sense of ownership and responsibility toward their institution.

The connection between belonging and active citizenship is mutually reinforcing. Belonging creates the conditions necessary for students to feel connected and motivated to contribute, while active citizenship deepens students' sense of purpose and responsibility within their communities. This dynamic not only benefits students by enhancing their personal growth and academic success but also contributes to building inclusive, cohesive communities. **Higher education institutions have a vital role in fostering this progression,** helping students become agents of positive change and contributing to more inclusive and sustainable communities, both locally and globally.

Volunteering as an underlier for Active Citizenship

Volunteering plays a critical role as a foundation for the development of active citizenship, particularly in the context of student mobility and higher education. The act of volunteering extends beyond simply giving time; it is deeply intertwined with the cultivation of a sense of responsibility, social involvement, and the motivation to contribute to the collective well-being. Volunteering offers students the opportunity to connect with their communities, gain practical skills, and foster a deep understanding of social issues, all of which are key components of active citizenship.

Volunteering serves as a bridge between the academic world and real-world societal challenges. By engaging in volunteer work, students apply the knowledge and skills they gain in the classroom to real-world situations, which not only enhances their learning experience but also enables them to make meaningful contributions to society. This form of experiential learning fosters a sense of civic duty and empowers students to take responsibility for their communities.

Volunteering provides opportunities for **students to become directly involved in solving community problems**, whether by working with marginalised groups, participating in environmental sustainability projects, or supporting health and social services. These experiences reinforce the idea that active citizenship is not just about participation in formal political processes but also involves active engagement in local, social, and environmental initiatives that drive positive change.

Several psychological and sociological theories underpin the link between volunteering and active citizenship. **Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their group memberships, and volunteering provides a way for students to connect to social groups and communities.** This connection fosters a sense of belonging and social responsibility, motivating individuals to take action on behalf of those groups. When students volunteer, they become more invested in the welfare of the community, contributing to social causes that align with their values. Similarly, Self-Determination Theory explains that when students feel autonomous, competent, and related to others, they are more likely to engage in activities like volunteering, which offer them meaningful ways to contribute to their community. **Volunteering fulfills students' needs for connection, competence, and purpose,** which in turn encourages further engagement and a commitment to social causes.

Beyond personal development, **volunteering also has a significant impact on the broader community.** When students volunteer, they contribute to solving local problems, strengthening social networks, and supporting sustainability initiatives. These efforts create lasting benefits for both the students and the communities they serve. Volunteering projects often focus on addressing critical societal issues such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and public health. Students who participate in these projects are not just passive participants but become advocates for change, pushing for solutions to the issues they encounter. Their contributions often spark collective efforts within communities to address systemic problems, making them key actors in the process of social change.

Higher education institutions can play a vital role in supporting and promoting volunteering as a means of fostering active citizenship. By providing students with opportunities to volunteer, universities can help students make the connection between academic learning and social action. Many institutions already offer **service-learning programmes that combine academic courses with community service**, enabling students to gain credit while addressing local needs. These programmes not only enhance the students' learning experiences but also provide them with a platform to actively engage in civic life. Through such programmes, universities can empower students to take on leadership roles within their communities and help them understand the significance of their contributions.

To encourage more students to volunteer, universities can implement various strategies, including raising awareness about the benefits of volunteering, offering volunteer fairs, providing logistical support for volunteer initiatives, and recognizing students' volunteer work through awards or academic credit. **Institutions can also partner with local organisations** to create structured volunteer opportunities that align with students' academic programmes and interests. This approach ensures that volunteerism becomes an integral part of students' educational experience, not just an extracurricular activity.

Additionally, universities can help international students prepare for volunteering by **offering pre-departure orientations that cover topics such as cultural sensitivity, communication skills, and community engagement strategies.** These orientations can help students understand the expectations of volunteer work and navigate any challenges they may encounter in their host countries. By providing students with the tools and support they need to succeed, universities can help them maximize the benefits of their volunteering experiences and ensure that their contributions have a lasting, positive impact on both their personal development and the communities they serve.

Volunteering in an international context, particularly within student mobility programmes, further enhances the global dimension of active citizenship. International students who volunteer in their host communities are able to share their cultural perspectives while also learning from local customs and traditions. This cultural exchange fosters mutual understanding and strengthens the global community. Moreover, international volunteering promotes the values of global citizenship, where students recognise their responsibility not just to their local communities but to the global society as a whole. **The experience of volunteering abroad challenges students to think beyond their national identities** and understand their roles in addressing global issues such as poverty, climate change, and social justice.

In conclusion, volunteering is a powerful foundation for active citizenship, providing students with opportunities to develop the skills, values, and sense of responsibility necessary for meaningful engagement in civic life. Through volunteering, students connect with their communities, develop a sense of social responsibility, and contribute to the common good. This active participation not only benefits students by enhancing their personal growth and employability but also strengthens the fabric of communities, fosters cross-cultural understanding, and promotes global citizenship. Higher education institutions, by supporting volunteering initiatives, play a crucial role in preparing students to be engaged, responsible, and proactive citizens who are committed to creating positive social change. **Volunteering is not just an extracurricular activity; it is a vital pathway for students to become active citizens who contribute to the building of inclusive, equitable, and sustainable communities.**

Impact of Volunteering in International Mobility Students

Volunteering has a profound impact on international mobility students, offering a range of benefits that enhance both their personal growth and their overall educational experience. These students, often far from home and immersed in unfamiliar cultural and academic environments, find volunteering to be a valuable way to connect with their host communities, build new social networks, and contribute meaningfully to the local society. The act of volunteering, particularly in an international context, plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging, enhancing intercultural competence, and preparing students for active citizenship.

For international students, volunteering serves as an effective way to integrate into their new environment. **It provides an opportunity to engage directly with local people, understand the cultural nuances of the host country, and contribute to the betterment of the community.** Many international students

may initially feel isolated or disconnected from their host culture, particularly in the early stages of their mobility. Volunteering offers a tangible way to break down cultural barriers and form personal connections that help foster a sense of inclusion. Whether it's through working with local organisations, supporting community initiatives, or participating in environmental projects, volunteering allows students to feel they are contributing to something larger than themselves, strengthening their ties to the host community.

In addition to social integration, **volunteering provides international students with unique opportunities for personal development.** Through volunteer work, students learn and refine essential life skills such as communication, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving. These skills are not only valuable in the context of community service but are also critical in academic and professional settings. Volunteering challenges students to step outside of their comfort zones, engage with people from different backgrounds, and navigate complex social situations. This kind of experiential learning helps students grow emotionally and intellectually, contributing to their personal development and enhancing their overall resilience.

Furthermore, volunteering in an international setting exposes students to a variety of perspectives and worldviews, enriching their intercultural competence. It offers a firsthand understanding of the social, political, and economic realities of their host country, providing insights that extend far beyond what is learned in the classroom. For students coming from diverse backgrounds, volunteering helps them recognise both the similarities and differences between their own culture and that of their host community. This fosters greater empathy, cultural sensitivity, and global awareness, qualities that are essential for becoming responsible global citizens. **By actively engaging with local communities, international students gain a deeper appreciation of global interconnectivity,** and they often become more attuned to issues such as poverty, inequality, sustainability, and social justice.

The impact of volunteering extends beyond personal and social development, as it also plays a significant role in **enhancing the academic experience of international mobility students.** Volunteering often complements and reinforces the academic knowledge gained through coursework, offering students a real-world context for their studies. For example, students studying social sciences, environmental studies, public health, or education can apply theoretical concepts to practical community-based projects, deepening their understanding of these subjects and making their learning more meaningful. **Additionally, by working with community organisations, students gain insights into how academic knowledge can be translated into practical action, which enriches**

their overall educational experience. This connection between learning and community service helps students see the relevance of their education and motivates them to engage more fully with their academic pursuits.

Moreover, volunteering plays a key role in **enhancing the employability of international students.** Employers increasingly value not only academic qualifications but also the soft skills and experiences that volunteering provides. Through their volunteer work, **students gain a range of transferable skills, such as leadership, adaptability, and communication,** all of which are highly sought after in the global job market. Volunteering also demonstrates to future employers that a student is socially responsible, proactive, and capable of working in diverse and often challenging environments. For international students, these experiences can significantly enhance their resumes, providing them with a competitive edge in the job market upon graduation.

In conclusion, volunteering has a significant and multifaceted impact on international mobility students, offering them valuable opportunities for personal growth, academic enrichment, and social engagement. Through volunteering, students gain essential skills, deepen their intercultural understanding, and become more active and responsible global citizens. Volunteering also enhances their employability, strengthens their academic experiences, and allows them to contribute meaningfully to the local communities they are part of. For universities, supporting volunteering initiatives creates a culture of social responsibility and global awareness that benefits both students and the broader community. Ultimately, volunteering is a powerful tool that helps international students integrate into their host societies, enrich their educational experiences, and contribute to a more interconnected and equitable world.

Access Needs of Students for Engagement and Integration on Exchange

To gather in-depth insights into the experiences of international exchange students, particularly regarding their integration into and interaction with local communities and factors influencing their civic engagement, two methods were combined. This chapter presents key findings from the latest [ESNsurvey - 15th Edition](#), the Erasmus Student Network's flagship research project, which gathered

17,855 answers collected from exchange students, 1,856 answers from full-degree students and 3,064 from non-mobile students.

Additionally, ESN conducted a focus group with 40 participants from diverse backgrounds, offering valuable perspectives on integration and active participation in host communities. The key findings from the focus group complement and enrich the quantitative data collected from the ESNsurvey on these topics, by including personal stories from students that specifically address integration and volunteering activities.

Expectations about engagement with local communities

When students consider participating in learning mobility, there are certain factors that influence their final choice. According to ESNsurvey data, among **the strongest push factors for students to go on mobility are the possibility to engage with and gain knowledge about another culture**. In accordance with that, what drives students to choose one mobility destination over another is highly impacted by pull factors, such as the academic reputation of the host institution, or the affordability of the city. The ESNsurvey respondents have placed on a third position in the importance rating the **possibility to engage with the local community during their exchange**. Therefore, students form expectations about their mobility experience that they will have interactions with the local community before even applying for a study period abroad.

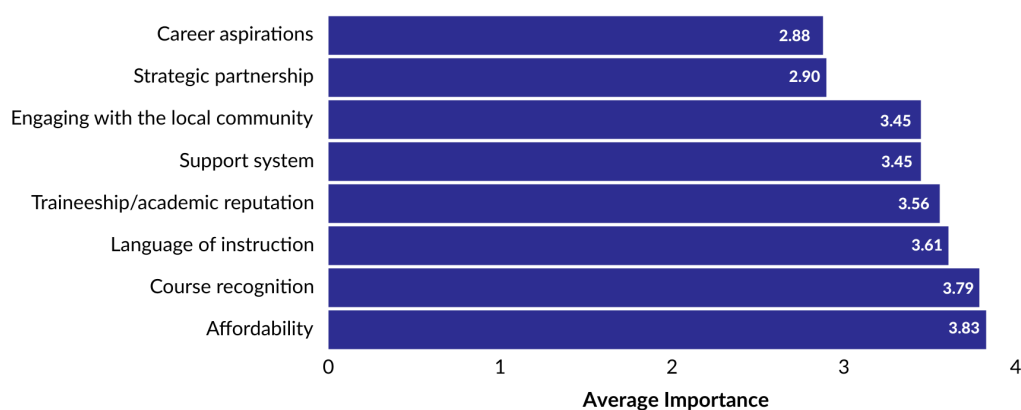


Figure 1: Average importance of pull factors in students' mobility choices (N = 14,487), ESNsurvey XV data

Engagement with different groups during mobility

In reality, when mobility takes place, the ESNsurvey revealed dynamics that underscore the need for greater integration actions and programmes. **Engagement with local communities is considerably lower than with non-local groups**, and international students often struggle with integrating into local communities. Only 34% of respondents reported engaging with local community members 'often' or 'very often', compared to 63% and 35.7% who reported similar engagement with international students from other countries and students from their home country, respectively. The most common response for engagement with local groups, including local students from the host country and local community members, was 'sometime' (33% and 31%, respectively).

This data is further confirmed by the focus group participants. While there is some level of engagement, many participants either struggled with or did not prioritise local integration.

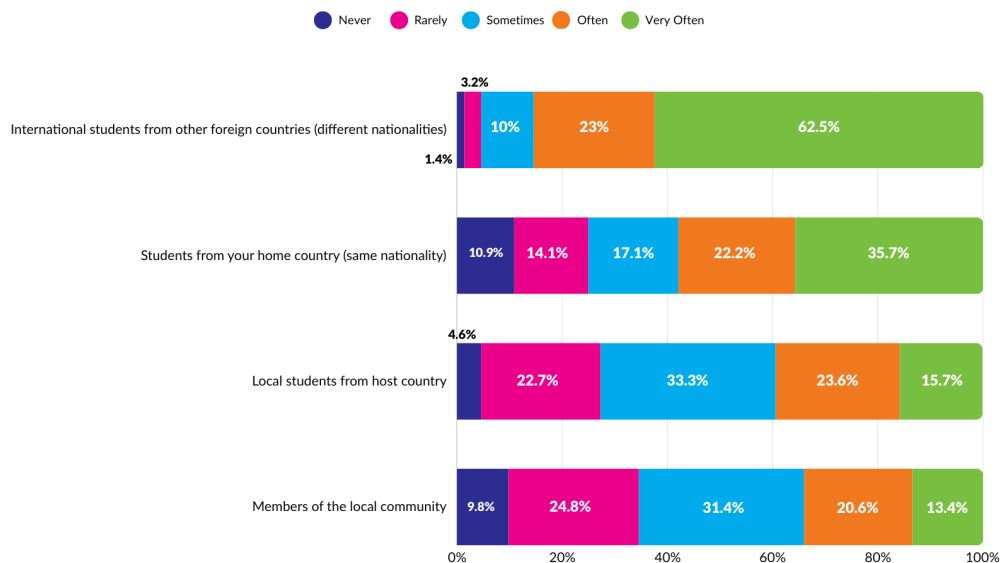


Figure 2: Exchange students' distribution of the frequency of interaction with different groups (N = 14,396), ESNsurvey XV data

For international full-degree students, the trend of limited engagement with locals persists but shows some variation. Engagement with non-local groups remains high ('very often' for 55% with international students from other countries and 27% with students from their home country). However, engagement with local students from the host country is more common, with 'often' being the

most frequent response (28%). Similarly, 38% reported engaging with local community members 'sometimes.' Full-degree students reported higher participation in local activities such as joining student/youth associations, sporting clubs, and volunteering. These findings suggest that **a longer stay in a country leads to greater engagement with local community activities**, as full-degree students have more time to integrate and interact with the local community. Another possible explanation could be that international full-degree students experience resistance for integration from the local community to a lesser extent compared to exchange students.

ESNsurvey also assessed the number of friends students made from different groups. Among 14,017 responses, 92.9% of respondents reported making 2-5 friends from international students of different nationalities. Conversely, 32.4% of respondents reported making 0-1 friend from local community members. This trend is consistent among international full-degree students, with 93.4% reporting 2-5 friends from international students and fewer friendships with locals.

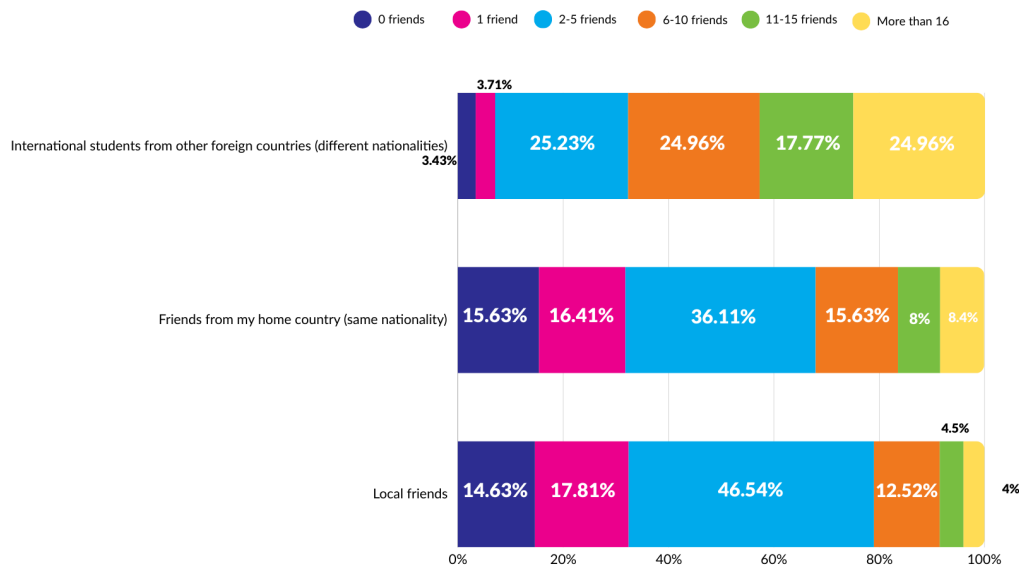


Figure 3: Percentage of number of international friends of exchange students (N= 14,017)

Participation and civic engagement activities

Civic engagement is one of the crucial methods to integrate international students effectively. According to the ESNsurvey, **students who participated in activities organised by ESN sections or other local organisations reported higher**

satisfaction with integration and support services. These activities have proved to foster a sense of belonging and encourage active participation in the local community.

Furthermore, the **respondents highlighted the importance of welcome and orientation events in promoting civic engagement**, as they consider being offered a myriad of opportunities key to their quality exchange journey. International full-degree students, in particular, expressed lower satisfaction with these initiatives, with only 32% feeling adequately informed and oriented by their host institutions, compared to 46% of exchange students. Improving these initial interactions can significantly enhance the overall integration experience.

Participation in local community or host institution activities varies significantly between short-term and full-degree international students. Among exchange students, 22% joined local sports clubs, 15% joined local student associations, 10% volunteered, 7% joined the student union, 7% participated in arts/music/drama clubs, and 7% found part-time jobs. Over half (54%) did not engage in any of these activities. Compared to ESNsurvey data from 2021, the number of students volunteering during exchange from before the Covid-19 pandemic has not changed (10%), which indicates that perhaps **no further effective measures have been taken to facilitate such activities and encourage students to take part**. Furthermore, language remains a barrier for effective participation and integration of international students.

“Even though I signed up to volunteer in a student's association, I felt pretty much excluded since I was afraid to speak French with native students.”

Student quote

In contrast, **full-degree international students show higher engagement**: 31.63% found part-time jobs, 30.16% joined student associations, 26.88% joined sports clubs, 22.48% volunteered, 15.79% joined the student union, and 9.92% participated in arts/music/drama clubs. Only 27.35% did not engage in any activities. The difference between the two student groups could be explained with a stronger motivation for the full-degree students to immerse themselves into the local environment where they would spend longer periods of time, compared to regular student mobility. It is possible that in some of the cases, the access to such opportunities for full-degree students could be easier, with more established procedures for the general student population of the higher education institutions. Those procedures might not always be open to exchange students.

“One-semester students are not allowed to join social clubs so you don't really get to connect with local students.”

Student quote, ESNsurvey - 15th Edition

“The programmes like sports club which the university provides were not very open to welcome international students because of the short amount of time we were there. It is understandable but a program for all students would have been nice.”

Student quote, ESNsurvey - 15th Edition

On the perception of **embedding volunteering and civic engagement activities in university courses** as an attractive factor when choosing an exchange programme, the majority of participants responded positively. **Most students expressed that such opportunities would significantly enhance their exchange experience**, with only a few remaining uncertain. This suggests a strong interest among students in structured, community-focused programmes as part of their academic experience abroad.

The **recognition aspect of service-learning through acquiring ECTS was positively received**, as the hurdles faced when recognizing credits are still very much present in the mobility landscape. This recognition should not have significant weight but rather serve as an acknowledgement for people who want to engage in civic work and develop a deeper connection with the locals. However, many participants emphasised that the civic engagement component should be optional. They were concerned that making them mandatory could burden students with additional work, potentially dampening the quality of mobility experience and creating limitations.

Benefits regarding engagement with local communities

A sizable number of participants in the focus group pointed out that **interactions with locals played a significant role in helping them overcome feelings of isolation, enhance social inclusion, and reduce stress**. Simple interactions, such as speaking with local people when running errands and receiving friendly feedback, helped students feel more integrated into the community. These everyday exchanges made them feel welcomed and valued, boosting their sense of belonging. However, in some cases, students encountered serious barriers when attempting to enter into contact with the local community, making integration challenging. Despite these difficulties, joining student organisations and community groups has often helped to bridge the gap and facilitate better connections.

Barriers to integration

Despite a somewhat strong presence of opportunities for engagement, significant challenges remain. For instance, 28% of exchange international students reported experiencing problems in connecting to local students. These challenges, accompanied by insufficient funding and difficulties in finding affordable housing contribute to feelings of anxiety and stress for 42% of international students. Additionally, 23% of exchange students reported feelings of isolation and social exclusion due to these integration difficulties.

The ESNsurvey further provides qualitative data through its open box questions, which helps understand the nuances of the student experience better. When asked to share any negative comments about their experience at the host institution, students often referred to **“lack of integration activities organised by the host university”**, or **“the integration into the local community was not assisted”**. Overall, four words stand out when students describe their experience with integration challenges: **“help”**, **“information”**, **“assistance”**, and **“guidance”**. Therefore, the following barriers could be listed:

- **Help with integration in the local community.** In most student responses “help” is the most commonly used word. Asking for help means that a person asks for something to be made easier or possible for someone to do something, or to give them something that they need (Oxford Dictionary). Using this word, students call for action and ask the universities to create spaces for interaction, to strategically organise their welcoming into the local community, so that they, the students, could then integrate more easily.

“Do more to help international students interact with the local community.”

Student quote, ESNsurvey - 15th Edition

“I did not feel at all like I was part of the local community, and so I didn't get to practise my German much. This was one of the main reasons I went to Germany, so I don't think I improved as much as I could have. I would have liked the host institution to have helped us integrate into the local society more.”

Student quote

- **Lack of information.** A very significant element of giving help is providing information. Students share that both prior and during their mobility they cannot learn about activities in which international students can participate, such as sports, cultural activities, volunteering, student clubs.

*“We had **no information** about any other activities on campus, such as sports, cultural events...”*

Student quote, ESNsurvey - 15th Edition

- **Assistance with integration through events and activities**, or lack of integration models. Low satisfaction has been reported by exchange students regarding the support for integration into the local student community provided by the Host institution (2.95/5), which is even lower than the data reported in ESNsurvey XIV (3.59/5). This highlights the importance of continuously providing robust support to students during their mobility experience. For example, in a comparison of data between students who made friends through participation in activities organised by local ESN sections and students who did not take part in such, those who did resulted in making more friends compared to those who did not. This is why it is not only important to create spaces for interaction, but it is also equally important to ensure facilitation, e.g. through peer to peer support.

*“The integration into the local community was **not assisted**.”*

Student quote, ESNsurvey - 15th Edition

*“There should be **more activities to include you in the local community and to integrate with local students**.”*

Student quote, ESNsurvey - 15th Edition

- **Guidance**. Sometimes the lack of information is not the issue, but support and guidance with enrolling for available opportunities and on how to integrate socially and build connections with the local community.

*“I wish they had some **guidance for club activities**.”*

Student quote, ESNsurvey - 15th Edition

Furthermore, the student insights outline a few more persisting challenges:

- **Lack of flexibility in existing student participation models**. Existing structures are not adaptable enough to ensure quality and efficient integration of international students. Student councils or clubs often do not allow short- and long-term mobility students to take part in them, while their participation could bring in know-how, it can stimulate exchange of best practices, and it would bridge the gap between international and local students.

*“As an international student it was quite difficult to engage in the student clubs since most clubs do not offer spaces for just one semester, **which I believe took away a part of the exchange experience.**”*

Student quote, ESNsurvey - 15th Edition

- **Language remains a barrier for integration.** Students share that often even if they manage to participate in a student club, the majority of students are local and the main language of communication is the local language, which might slow down the integration or reduce the quality of the interaction. Others would not even consider the opportunity to enrol for an activity or club, when they know that it will be in the local language and there is no facilitation offered.

*“I did not always feel comfortable at the events and in the student clubs. Nothing bad had happened though, **I just had trouble to integrate myself** while trying to understand the language and learn everything important about this new place.”*

Student quote, ESNsurvey - 15th Edition

*“Even though I signed up to volunteer in a student's association, **I felt pretty much excluded** since I was afraid to speak French with native students.”*

Student quote, ESNsurvey - 15th Edition

- **Attitudinal barriers.** Often students report that even if they take part in a class with local students, they might still not feel comfortable or integrated. Some students report unequal treatment and access to opportunities compared to local students.

“One thing I was very unhappy about is that the student union and guilds don't involve exchange students in their activities at all and are even discriminative towards them if you want to get involved or want to volunteer, let alone the fact that information is almost always only available in the local language.”

Student quote, ESNsurvey - 15th Edition

Inclusion Measures in Mobility: Current Practices in Higher Education Institutions

To gain a deeper understanding of the university perspective, the ECEM consortium conducted a comprehensive survey among Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to explore current practices that support learners in accessing and engaging with mobility opportunities (Annex I). The survey looked at student participation rates, as well as policies and processes in place to support engagement with mobility programmes by learners. The current state of play and practices presented in this chapter are based on the key findings from the survey, which collected 49 responses from university staff members from different higher education institutions.

The Institutional Survey report provides an in-depth analysis of inclusion measures at European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) aimed at supporting students participating in mobility programmes, with a focus on identifying current practices, challenges, and areas for enhancement. Drawing on responses from different Higher Education Institutions, the report examines both incoming and outgoing student experiences and the strategies employed to promote accessibility, integration, and engagement in the context of international mobility programmes.

Institutional Policies

The surveyed HEIs employ a variety of inclusion measures to support incoming students, fostering integration into academic and social environments. Common practices include **orientation seminars, buddy systems, mentoring programmes, cultural activities, and collaboration with student associations** like the Erasmus Student Network (ESN). These initiatives aim to create a welcoming environment and help students adapt to their new surroundings. Notable examples include the University of Szeged, which combines cultural immersion activities with academic and administrative support, and University College Dublin, which provides individualised learning plans, campus accessibility, and community engagement opportunities. Such measures promote not only academic success but also personal growth, social engagement, and mental well-being.

Despite these efforts, survey data reveals **gaps in institutional strategies**. Many respondents expressed uncertainty about whether their institutions have clear,

formalised inclusion strategies. Only a minority strongly agreed that comprehensive plans exist, highlighting a degree of inconsistency or ambiguity in institutional policies toward the integration of mobility students.

A critical finding concerns the **evaluation of partner institutions in mobility programmes**. While some HEIs prioritise academic support and student success when assessing partnerships, integration efforts – such as mentoring and community engagement – are less frequently evaluated. Approximately 69% of the responding institutions reported that **they do not systematically assess the integration measures of partner institutions**, indicating a missed opportunity to enhance the overall quality of the mobility experience.

Support Services for Incoming Students

Mobility programmes, including Erasmus+, national initiatives, and institutional programmes, are central to HEIs' internationalisation strategies. However, **support services for students vary significantly**. While financial assistance, language courses, and cultural orientation are commonly offered, areas such as reintegration support for returning students and structured community engagement during mobility remain underdeveloped. Institutions also rank different mobility programmes unevenly, with Erasmus+ being the most emphasised, while others receive limited attention.

Current practices in higher education institutions (HEIs) identified through the survey aimed at promoting inclusion for students in mobility programmes focus on creating accessible, supportive environments that facilitate integration, participation, and equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their background or mobility status. These practices reflect the increasing recognition that student mobility – whether short-term or long-term – should not only offer academic and cultural enrichment but also promote social inclusion, equity, and community engagement.

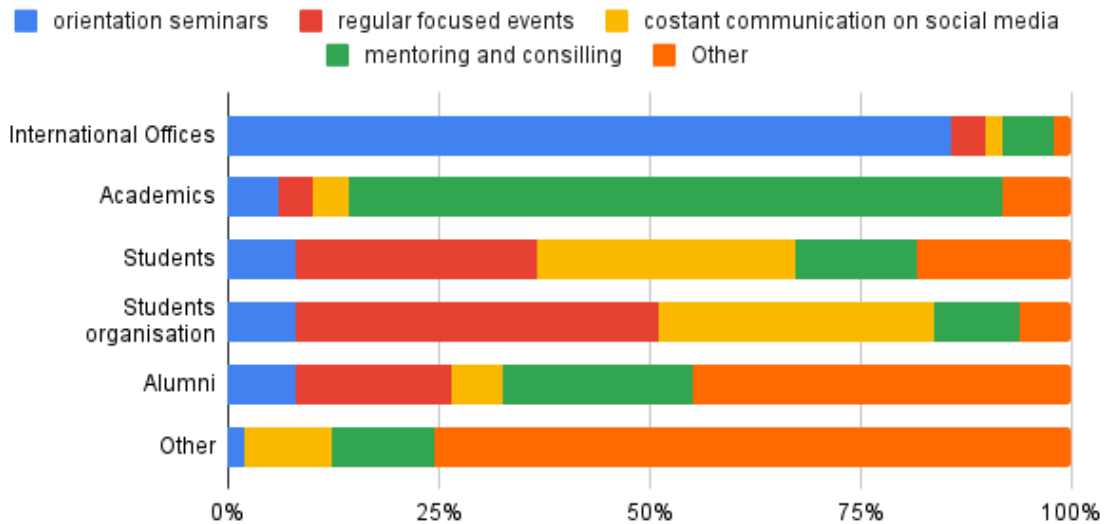


Figure 4: Integration support actions offered to mobility students by different groups

The following practices were identified through the survey for university staff members, who were asked to map which kind of integration actions are offered to students by different actors in higher education (Figure 4). **The most popular type of support offered by International Relations Offices are orientation seminars**, while mentoring and counselling is mostly being offered by academics. The role of student organisations and students is mainly expressed through organisation of regular events and activities for their peers. At the same time, **the role of mobility alumni was not clearly defined** by the respondents, with the majority of them allocating them to “other” type of support, indicating that perhaps this group has underused potential. In the table below, the strong assets of various supporting measures identified through the institutional survey are outlined.

Buddy System	The buddy system is a highly utilised method of supporting new students by pairing them with more experienced peers who can help them navigate both academic and social settings. This system not only provides practical guidance but also gives students an immediate personal connection, which is essential for establishing a sense of community.
Orientation Seminars	Orientation seminars are another critical element that helps students get acquainted with the university, its procedures, and the broader community. These seminars are frequently mentioned in conjunction with buddy systems and cultural activities as foundational steps for building familiarity and comfort among incoming students.

<p>Mentoring</p>	<p>Mentoring plays a significant role in ensuring that students feel supported throughout their stay. Mentors, who are often staff members, provide a range of support including counselling, academic guidance, and regular check-ins to address any challenges faced by the students.</p>
<p>Cultural Activities</p>	<p>Cultural activities are another important strategy, designed to expose students to the local culture and customs, thereby enhancing their cultural understanding and making their integration more effective and enjoyable. These activities include events, workshops, and trips that promote cultural awareness and foster cross-cultural interactions.</p>
<p>Collaboration with Local Student Associations</p>	<p>Student associations, such as ESN, play a central role in supporting mobility students' integration. ESN provides consistent support through organised social events, excursions, and networking opportunities. These associations work closely with both the international office and student mentors to provide a holistic approach to integration, which includes both social and academic components. The collaboration between student associations and the university helps students engage actively with both local and international student communities, fostering friendships and a deeper sense of connection.</p>
<p>Community Integration through Various Groups</p>	<p>The actions taken by various university groups also contribute significantly to the integration of mobility students. The International Office primarily organises welcome and orientation seminars, providing students with crucial information and helping them settle into the new environment. Academics, on the other hand, focus on mentoring and counselling, which ensures that students receive academic support tailored to their needs. Regular engagement between academic staff and students also provides a channel for students to express their concerns or seek guidance, helping them keep up with their coursework and understand expectations.</p>
<p>Student Integration Activities</p>	<p>In addition to the support from faculty and mentors, students and student associations play an active role in integration through organising regular focused events, orientation activities, and constant communication on social media. These events allow students to meet others in similar circumstances, participate in organised activities, and be part of groups where they can learn more about the local culture and language. Social media communication by groups like ESN keeps students updated and provides a consistent platform for peer interaction.</p>

Alumni and Other External Support	Alumni involvement in the integration process is mentioned in some cases, primarily through mentoring and counselling efforts. Alumni who were once international students themselves can offer unique insights and support to new students, helping them navigate both academic challenges and social adaptation. Other support groups are involved as well, such as family connection programs (e.g., IRO Connecting Families Programme), which help students create connections outside the university, fostering further community support and ensuring students feel part of a network beyond just the academic setting.
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In conclusion, higher education institutions are taking significant steps toward creating inclusive environments for mobility students by implementing a wide range of supportive practices. These practices aim to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, can access mobility opportunities, integrate into new academic and social environments, and contribute meaningfully to their host communities. By fostering a culture of inclusion, HEIs not only enrich the student experience but also promote global citizenship, social responsibility, and mutual understanding across borders.

Inclusion Measures for Incoming Students

The survey asked HEIs to identify which are the main categories of incoming students from groups with fewer opportunities to understand if they also provide targeted support to these groups.

Based on the summarised survey data, the universities categorised incoming students from groups with fewer opportunities under a range of labels:

- minority background,
- refugees and asylum seekers,
- students with physical or learning disabilities,
- low economic background,
- first-generation students,
- rural area graduates,
- *others*.

The ranking of the prevalence of each group varies significantly across different categories. **Students with learning disabilities and low economic backgrounds often top the list**, indicating they are among the most prevalent groups supported by the HEIs. In contrast, students with physical disabilities and refugees/asylum seekers tend to be ranked lower in terms of number of beneficiaries.

First-generation students and those from rural areas have varied rankings, depending on the specific institution.

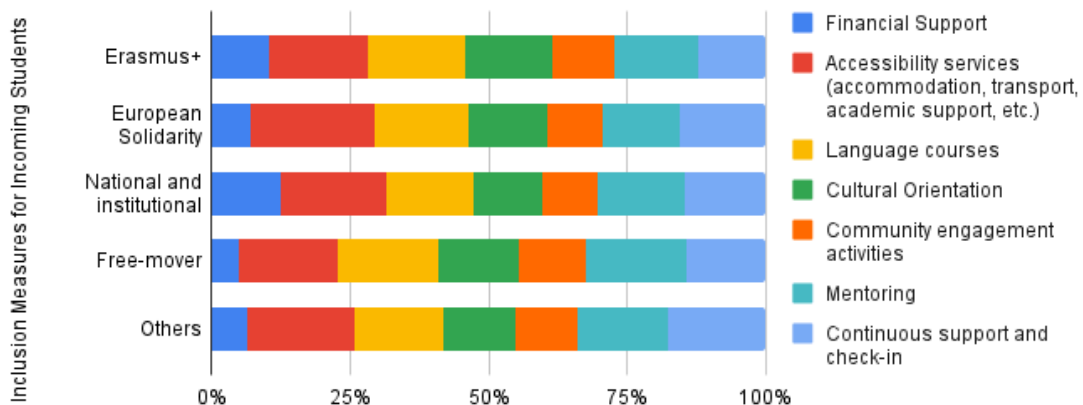


Figure 5: Inclusion measures offered by the university to incoming students

The most common type of support by higher education institutions for incoming Erasmus+ students is **support related to accommodation, transportation, academic support** (Figure 5). This indicates that HEIs pay attention to the formal integration of students, by helping them to settle in their host city. The second most common practice is providing language support to incoming students. Given that language is among the main barriers to integration, it is interesting to see that universities pay attention to this aspect of integration in some way. **The least offered support regards the community engagement activities**, highlighting that such activities are not predominant, and perhaps not organised in a structured way, targeting international students. Continuous check-in is also not among the highest ranking support measures, presenting a concerning trend, as integration does not stop after the welcome and orientation days, but it is a continuous process.

Preparation and Integration Measures for Outbound Mobility Support

HEIs were asked to rank the most common **groups of students with fewer opportunities in outgoing mobility from their institutions**. Students from low economic backgrounds are the most distinguished group, followed by students with physical disabilities, first generation students and refugee students. The groups that were ranked lower, meaning that they are identified among less universities, are students with learning disabilities and those coming from rural areas.

Support for outgoing students, while present, often lacks a holistic approach. Institutions provide logistical assistance, financial aid, and pre-departure preparation, but less attention is given to fostering community engagement or supporting reintegration upon return. For students from underrepresented or disadvantaged groups – such as those from low-income backgrounds, first-generation college attendees, or individuals with disabilities – additional targeted measures are necessary to ensure equity in access and experience.

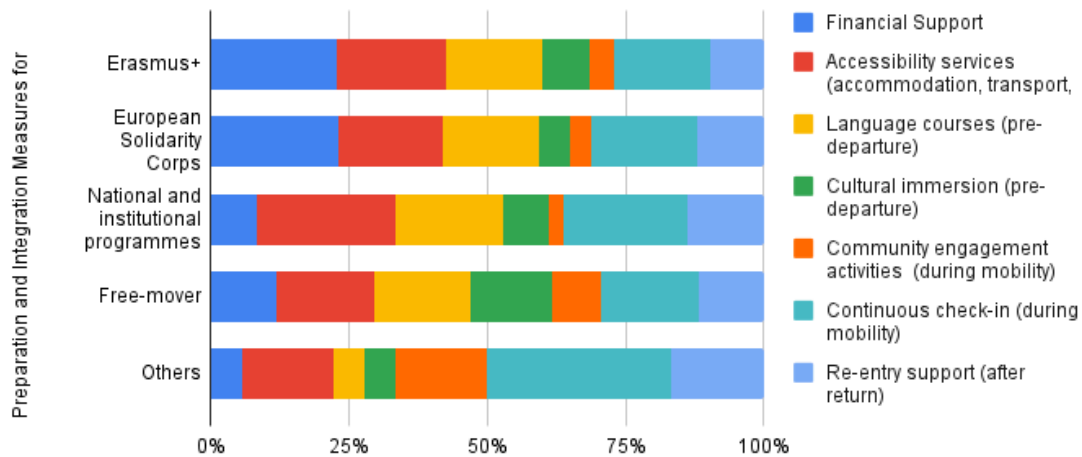


Figure 6: Inclusion measures offered by the university to outgoing students within the Erasmus+ programme

Overall, the data presented in Figure 6 emphasises that a well-structured support system is necessary for all students to maximise the potential of their mobility experience. The most common support for outgoing Erasmus+ students is providing financial support as part of the programme framework. **Pre-departure activities for cultural immersion are rarely seen practice**, as well as community engagement activities. **Continuous check-in after return from mobility is not yet a common practice for the surveyed HEIs.**

Proper preparation and ongoing support ensure that students not only survive but thrive while studying abroad. This structured preparation equips them with the necessary skills, knowledge, and resources to make the most of their time in a new environment, thereby enhancing their academic, personal, and professional growth. The emphasis on measures such as **financial support, cultural immersion, community involvement, and continuous check-ins** highlights the importance of a thorough, multi-phase approach to mobility that begins well before departure and continues until students are fully reintegrated back home. This approach ultimately helps students transform their mobility experience into a meaningful and impactful journey that contributes positively to their development.

Community Engagement through Cultural Integration

The responses regarding **student participation in community engagement** reveal a mix of formal, emerging, and informal strategies across institutions. Some universities have dedicated units or staff to support community engagement and structured programmes like Service Learning, while others rely on support networks such as buddy systems or collaboration with student associations. A few institutions are still in the early stages of developing their strategies, focusing on initiatives like volunteering programmes or introducing mentors. However, there are noticeable gaps, with some respondents either unaware of existing activities or acknowledging that current efforts are insufficient.

To improve community engagement, universities should aim to formalise and expand programmes, enhance communication to increase awareness, and develop partnerships to support a broader range of activities. By establishing well-structured initiatives and ensuring students are informed and involved, institutions can create more consistent and impactful community participation opportunities.

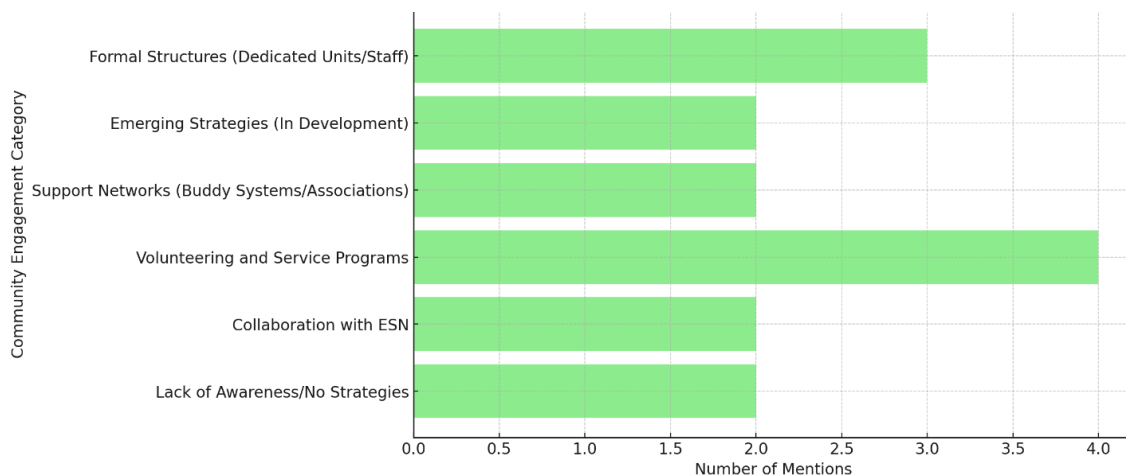


Figure 7: Community Engagement in HEIs, frequency of mentions

A majority of respondents, 52.2%, indicated that they “do not know” if **Service Learning** is part of their institution's strategic initiatives, reflecting a significant gap in awareness or communication on this matter. About 26.1% responded “No”, suggesting that in those cases, Service-Learning is explicitly not part of the institutional strategy. Meanwhile, 21.7% of the respondents answered “Yes”, indicating that a portion of institutions do incorporate Service-Learning into their strategic framework. Overall, the responses suggest a lack of clarity and perhaps inconsistent institutional approaches regarding the formal integration of Service-Learning.

Recognition of Community Engagement

The collected data shows that HEIs use a variety of mechanisms to recognise student participation in volunteering and community engagement initiatives, highlighting efforts to provide a holistic student experience include:

Common forms of recognition

- ✓ ECTS credits towards their degree (43%)
- ✓ Diploma Supplements (52%)
- ✓ Certificates (39%)
- ✓ Badges (22%)
- ✓ Micro-Credentials (13%)

These mechanisms aim to formally acknowledge the additional skills and experiences students gain outside of their academic pursuits. For example, one response indicated that “information about received badges is included in diploma supplements” integrating the achievements into official academic records. **The use of badges and certificates suggests that institutions are interested in giving students tangible proof of their contributions**, while the inclusion of ECTS credits and diploma supplements integrates these extracurricular efforts into students' official records, emphasising their importance.

However, there are also notable **gaps in the recognition of community engagement**. Approximately 17% of responses indicated the absence of formal mechanisms, with phrases like “None” or “I do not have knowledge about others” reflecting this lack of recognition. This implies that while some institutions actively foster community involvement and provide recognition, others are less structured or lack a comprehensive system. This inconsistency suggests that **not all students are being equally encouraged or rewarded for their extracurricular contributions**, potentially limiting the broader impact of these programs on student development and cultural integration. Structured and consistent recognition across institutions would be instrumental in enhancing the value of mobility programs, ensuring that students are not only academically enriched but also recognized for their personal and community growth.

Challenges in Student Integration

The Institutional Survey identifies several barriers to effective integration for mobility students. **Language barriers are the most significant**, limiting students' ability to engage fully with their host communities. Many students rely heavily on networks of other international students, which can negatively affect them. Additionally, a **lack of structured programmes** to connect students with local communities and organisations further hinders cultural immersion.

Another identified barrier is related to the **provision of information to students** about opportunities to engage with local organisations or community activities. Several respondents indicated challenges related to access to NGOs, information on NGOs, and knowledge of meetings and events.

Some institutions lack awareness of these challenges or have insufficient systems to address them, reflecting broader issues of **institutional ambivalence or resource limitations**. HEIs face competing administrative priorities, which can overshadow efforts to enhance integration.

Case Studies and Best Practices

The Institutional survey also highlights exemplary initiatives, such as the **University of Szeged's comprehensive support system**, which combines academic assistance, cultural immersion, and around-the-clock mentorship. Similarly, the **University of Porto's peer mentoring for outbound students** and **Kaunas University of Technology's seminars on intercultural communication** demonstrate the value of well-planned, inclusive strategies.

Programmes like the **"CoolWroTech" initiative at Wrocław University of Science and Technology** showcase the potential of community engagement through workshops and integration events, fostering meaningful connections between international students and local communities.

While European HEIs demonstrate progress in supporting mobility students, the report underscores the need for more strategic, consistent, and resource-supported approaches to inclusion. Addressing challenges such as language barriers, formalising integration strategies, and enhancing recognition of community engagement are essential steps toward creating a more inclusive and enriching mobility experience. By prioritising these areas, institutions can ensure that mobility programmes not only facilitate academic achievement but also foster personal growth, cultural exchange, and long-lasting connections for all participants.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Based on the valuable insight highlighted by both students and Higher Education Institutions perspective, the current report provides recommendations seeking to improve the integration and engagement of international students during their mobility. Furthermore, despite a high focus of the present report on learning mobility for individuals, the following recommendations are applicable to other experiences including full-degree international students.

The recommendations target mainly Higher Education Institutions, but also other key actors such as student-led organisations and local communities. Indeed, all actors involved should collaborate to improve students' inclusion and engagement during mobility periods.

The recommendations, which reflect the most recurring challenges identified in this report target information provision, guidance, language support, structured community engagement, targeted inclusion support, institutional practices, student participation and recognition.

Information Provision

One of the most frequent challenges identified by both students and HEIs is the lack of accessible information about opportunities for engagement. Many students report not knowing where or how to get involved in local community activities, such as volunteering, cultural events, or student clubs. This gap in communication often leaves students feeling disconnected from their host community, preventing them from fully immersing themselves in the cultural and social aspects of their mobility experience. Similarly, HEIs acknowledge this issue but often struggle to follow structured communication strategies to make these opportunities more visible to international students. Therefore, it is important that:

- HEIs ensure that information about local community engagement and extracurricular activities is presented, made available, easily accessible, and clearly communicated to students before and during their stay. Using social media, or incorporating this information into orientation materials can significantly improve students' awareness of how to get involved as well as.
- HEIs consider adopting the availability and accessibility of information for community engagement activities as an indicator for the evaluation of the current and prospective inter-institutional partnerships.

Guidance

While the lack of information stands as one of the major challenges in student engagement, it is also important to acknowledge the challenges faced to navigate local activities and opportunities. While some students do find activities to join, they often struggle with the enrollment process or feel uncertain about how to integrate socially. This gap is particularly noticeable for short-term exchange students, who are sometimes unsure where to start in terms of connecting with local students and communities, and if the existing opportunities are actually open to them as well. Even when opportunities are available, students often lack the necessary guidance on how to enroll in these programmes or make the most of them. **Therefore, based on this report, it is recommended that:**

- HEIs provide **more structured guidance for students**, including mentoring systems, peer-to-peer support, and clear step-by-step instructions for getting involved in activities, with the support of Erasmus+ Alumni and student-led organisations.
- HEIs, with the support of **Erasmus+ Alumni and student-led organisations**, organise workshops or orientation sessions focused on integration, where students can learn how to navigate cultural differences and build social connections, thereby empowering them to take more initiative in their integration process.
- HEIs reinforce collaboration with civil society organisations. Community organisations bring a fresh perspective and promote an open mindset. By leveraging their networks, universities can better facilitate integration of international students, expanding the offer for community engagement to more diverse fields and groups.

Language Support

Language barriers continue to be one of the main obstacles to effective integration for mobile students. Many report struggling to participate in activities due to language differences, either because they feel self-conscious about speaking the local language or because their proficiency doesn't allow them to fully engage in conversations. While some HEIs offer language courses, students often feel that these do not adequately prepare them for the informal, everyday language they encounter in social interactions. Additionally, many international students are hesitant to join local activities if they are conducted in a language they do not understand fluently. **Therefore, it is important that:**

- HEIs consider **offering more tailored language support** or creating opportunities for international students to practice the local language in

comfortable, supportive settings. This could include conversation clubs, informal meetups, or language exchange programmes.

- HEIs encourage local students to engage with international students in ways that are mindful of language barriers, helping to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone.
- HEIs **expand accessible language courses** and conversation programmes that can reduce communication barriers and foster deeper cultural connections.
- **Student-led organisations foster an open and inclusive environment** that reflects the diverse needs of the entire student population, ensuring that all students feel welcomed and supported, regardless of their language proficiency.

Structured Community Engagement

Students report that they would be interested in embedding civic engagement into their learning curriculum, as this would allow them to get in touch with the real world and gain a deeper understanding of the local community and its challenges, and become agents of change. The present report also outlined the numerous benefits that community engagement creates not only for students, but also for universities and local communities. Yet, community engagement is not as present in learning programmes, as it could be in Europe. Furthermore, there are gaps in links between higher education and civil society organisations. Therefore, it is recommended that:

- Institutions should **formalise community engagement opportunities** for students, making such participation an integral part of the mobility experience. Collaboration with local organisations, volunteering programmes, and service-learning initiatives can help bridge gaps between academic and social integration.
- **Integration of Service-Learning:** Linking academic curricula with community engagement fosters meaningful participation and contextual learning for mobility students.
- **Promotion of volunteering opportunities** should be a priority, with a strong emphasis on collaboration with local associations. Institutions should promote civic engagement opportunities through student councils, social media, and even during lectures to maximise awareness and participation.

Targeted Inclusion Support

The current report presents a nuanced state of play of identification of specific groups of students with fewer opportunities in higher education institutions. Furthermore, the support measures are highly dependent on existing mechanisms

deriving from mobility programmes, such as the Erasmus+. The inclusion support also varies when it comes to incoming and outgoing students. It seems like the support to incoming students is better organised, while the support for outgoing students lacks a holistic approach. Moreover, the inclusion support is often limited to providing additional financial means to students, while practical support with integration may remain overlooked. Therefore, based on the key findings of this report, it is important that:

- Higher education institutions have a **clear observation of the specific groups of students** in their student population.
- Higher education institutions **develop targeted support systems** for specific groups to ensure equitable access to mobility opportunities. This includes tailored financial aid, personalised support plans, and expanded mentorship programmes.

Improved Institutional Practices

The institutional survey presented in this report revealed an alarming situation among higher education institutions, as there are clear indications for gaps in their institutional strategies for inclusion and integration of international students, and lack of comprehensive plans. Furthermore, the report presents a missed opportunity for strengthening inclusion strategies, for example through partner evaluation. Therefore, HEIs should consider the following recommendations:

- **Improved Partner Evaluations:** Institutions should systematically assess the integration practices of partner universities to ensure alignment with inclusion goals. This should be a key criterion for inter-institutional partnership agreements and continuation of such.

Student Participation as a Form of Civic Engagement

In many contexts, both mobile students and HEIs have highlighted that organisations such as student councils, clubs, and societies are not flexible enough to include short-term participants, even though their involvement could significantly enrich the experience for everyone. This lack of structural flexibility, combined with attitudinal barriers, creates an environment where short-term mobility students may still feel excluded or disconnected, even when participating in classes with local students. Furthermore, while many student organisations or clubs are designed primarily for full-degree students and sometimes accommodate international full-degree students, they often fail to address the specific needs of short-term mobility students. By restricting participation to long-term students, these local student structures miss the opportunity to foster meaningful interaction between local and international students, hindering

cultural exchange and community building. **Therefore, the following is recommended:**

- **Student bodies and clubs should adopt more flexible models**, allowing short-term and exchange students to participate in a variety of ways, such as offering temporary memberships, organising activities, or creating shorter-term projects. **Institutional support is key** to making this change possible. It is essential that universities include mobility students in institutional decision-making processes to empower their voices and perspectives.
- HEIs to commit to raising awareness within the student body about the value of integrating international students in campus life. This will help **reduce attitudinal barriers and promote deeper integration**, allowing international students to act as catalysts for the enrichment of the university's diversity and fostering the exchange of ideas and best practices.

Recognition of Engagement

Higher education institutions identified recognition of engagement as one of the key areas where more efforts for improvement are needed. In fact, while several mechanisms are already implemented to acknowledge community engagement, there is still a gap in the consistency and comprehensiveness of these efforts. It is particularly important to note that community engagement remains inadequately recognised across many institutions. This inconsistency leads to unequal opportunities for students to have their non-academic experience recognised, which could ultimately represent a barrier for student engagement and social development. Therefore, Conferences of Rectors, HEIs and Ministries are encouraged to:

- **Introducing systems to recognise student involvement** in extracurricular and community activities through credits, certificates, or badges can incentivise participation and underscore the value of holistic learning.
- **Encourage the formal incorporation of community engagement** and other extracurricular activities in **students academic path** and recognising HEI's central role in the academic, personal and social growth of students.
- **Provide funding, resources and training** for staff and professors to develop and implement mechanisms for recognition and support HEIs to integrate these systems effectively.

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Annex I. Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in Mobility

14/11/24, 09:01

Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

The survey is designed by the [ECEM](#) consortium to investigate the current practices that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have in place to support learners in accessing the mobility opportunities and capitalizing on the student participation. More precisely, it aims to unveil diverse integration actions of universities in mobility programmes, which contribute to the seamless inclusion of international mobility students.

The questions are related to both inbound and outbound exchange programmes. Please discuss the questions with colleagues who are also involved in various processes or strategies pertaining to the topics.

The results of the survey will be used to bring forward potential recommendations for improving student experiences and engagement. Also, the case studies presented can be featured in the deliverables of the ECEM project.

Thank you.

ECEM team

* Indicates required question

Section I. Personal information

1. Name and surname: *

2. Title: *

3. Position: *

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Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

4. **Institution:** *

5. **Country:** *

6. **E-mail:** *

Section II. Information on mobility programmes - INBOUND

7. What are the **inbound mobility** programmes conducted in your institution? Please * arrange according to their importance or beneficiary numbers.

Tick all that apply.

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	Others - please specify.
Erasmus (including European University alliances)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
National programmes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Institutional programmes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Free movers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
European Solidarity Corps	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

8. Please specify for others.

9. What inclusion measures does your university offer to incoming students under the following mobility programmes? Choose all that apply. *

Tick all that apply.

	Financial Support	Accessibility services (accommodation, transport, academic support, etc.)	Language courses	Cultural orientation	Community engagement activities	Mentoring
Erasmus+	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
European Solidarity Corps	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
National and institutional programmes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Free-mover	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

10. Please specify for others.

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Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

11. Which are the main categories of incoming students from groups with fewer opportunities at your University? Please arrange by number of beneficiaries (from highest to smallest). *

Mark only one oval per row.

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
Minority background	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Refugees and assylum seekers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Physical disabilities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learning disabilities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Low economic background	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
First generation students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rural areas graduates	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

12. Please specify for others.

14/11/24, 09:01

Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

13. *Incoming students are encouraged to:* *

Mark only one oval.

- Volunteer in the local community*
- Find a part-time student job*
- Join the local Student Union/Council*
- Join a local student/youth association*
- Join a local sporting club/team*
- Join an art/music/drama club*
- Join other activities or clubs, please specify*
- None of the above*

Section III. Information on mobility programmes - OUTBOUND

14/11/24, 09:01

Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

14. What are the **outbound mobility** programmes conducted in your institution?
Please arrange according to their importance or beneficiary numbers.

Tick all that apply.

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	Others - please specify.
Erasmus (including European University alliances)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
National programmes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Institutional programmes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Free movers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
European Solidarity Corps	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

15. Please specify for others.

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Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

16. What integration measures does your university offer to outgoing students under the following mobility programmes? Choose all that apply.

Tick all that apply.

	Financial support (during mobility)	Accessibility services (accommodation, transport, academic support, etc.)	Language courses (pre-departure)	Cultural immersion (pre-departure)	Community engagement activities (during mobility)	Continu check- (durin mobili
Erasmus	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
National and institutional programmes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Free-mover	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
European Solidarity Corps	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

17. Please specify for others.

14/11/24, 09:01

Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

18. Which are the main categories of outgoing students from groups with fewer opportunities at your University? Please arrange by number of beneficiaries (from highest to smallest). *

Mark only one oval per row.

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th
Minority background	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Refugees and assylum seekers	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Physical disabilities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Learning disabilities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Low economic background	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
First generation students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Rural areas graduates	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

19. For other, please specify.

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Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

20. Which of the following factors influence your students' decision to participate in the outbound mobility programmes? *

Tick all that apply.

- Academic enrichment
- Cultural exposure
- Career advancement
- Personal growth
- Networking opportunities
- Global citizenship
- Adventure and exploration
- Do not know.

Section IV. Institutional policies

21. Your University has strategies related directly to the inclusion of international students (incoming students)? *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

22. You may provide details of your answer below, if you wish.

23. Your University has strategies related directly to the student participation in community engagement. *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

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Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

24. You may provide details of your answer below, if you wish.

25. Is Service Learning anchored in your institutional strategies? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No
 I do not know.

26. Is community engagement one of the factors considered in your Internationalization Strategy for the integration of international students? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No
 I do not know.

27. When shaping international partnerships, does your university assess if your partner institution has integration actions in place? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
 No

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Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

28. *If yes, what are the main criteria in assessing these actions?*

Mark only one oval.

- language courses*
- interaction with the community*
- mentoring*
- traineeships*
- academic support*
- other*

29. *How often do you evaluate your international partners? **

Mark only one oval.

- Annually*
- Every 3 years*
- At the end of every programme cycle*
- We do not unless there is an issue reported.*
- Other*

30. *If other, please specify.*

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Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

31. In the (self-)assessment process, please rate the order of the importance for the following factors in assessing mobility programmes:

Tick all that apply.

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
motivation and expectations of students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
skills or competencies developed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
opportunities for reflection	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
link between academic progress and extra-curricular activities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

32. If others, please specify.

Section V. Streamlined processes

33. What support services does your university have to help incoming students enhance their experience through volunteering or community service? *

Tick all that apply.

- Volunteer counselling
- Mentoring
- Cultural training
- Cooperation with local organisations (e.g., NGOs)
- Collaboration with local students association (e.g. ESN)
- Others

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1ZbRKawjUxmBkbVUd0GTwQdbqVZ2P-xVM9A6BYKqjWo/edit>

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Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

34. *If others, please specify*

35. *What support services does your university have to help incoming students' sense of belonging or integration?* *

Tick all that apply.

- Buddy system
- Orientation seminar
- Mentoring
- Cultural offer/activities
- Collaboration with local students association (e.g. ESN)
- Others

36. *If others, please specify*

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Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

37. *Through which actions do the following groups support mobility students' integration?* *

Mark only one oval per row.

	Welcome and orientation seminars	Regular focused events	Constant communication on social media	Mentoring and conselling	Others
International Office	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Academics	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Student associations (e.g. ESN)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Alumni	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

38. *If others, please specify.*

39. *Does your institution encourage outgoing students to take on extracurricular activities?* *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes, before mobility.
- Yes, during mobility.
- Yes, after the return.
- No.
- Other: _____

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Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

40. Please specify what mechanisms you have for recognition of volunteering and community engagement initiatives.

Tick all that apply.

- ECTS Credits towards their degree
- Diploma Supplements
- Micro Credentials
- Badges
- Certificates
- Other: _____

41. If others, please specify

Section VI. Reflection and learning

42. What challenges or barriers do students report in connecting with the local community?

43. What areas do you see for improvement in the volunteering and community engagement programmes do you see?

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Institutional Survey on Inclusion Measures in mobility

44. *Where do you consider your institution could enhance its support for the integration of mobility students?*

Section IV. Examples of institutional practices

45. *HEIs have a diverse range of practices in inclusion in internationalization and student integration. Please present a specific programme, approach, or case in reference to mobility students and volunteering or community service. You may either insert below a text of max. one page or by upload a file in the following question.*

46. *Please upload here your University's case study.*

Files submitted:

47. *Please check below the appropriate consent box. **

Tick all that apply.

- I consent that the ECEM project partners use the data according to GDPR regulations.*
 I consent that the ECEM project partners use the data according to GDPR regulations and agree that the case study presented be used in the ECEM report.

Thank you for your contribution.

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Google.

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