

HOW LONG IS TOO LONG



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Unleashing the Potential of Different Mobility Formats

by Paola Di Marzo, Wim Gabriels, Juan Rayon González
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Introduction to the project

The project How Long is Too Long (HLiTL) aims at optimising mobility in higher education (HE) in Europe and finding the most effective mobility schemes to improve students' and staff skills, by considering 2 variables: the length of the mobility and the type of mobility (physical, virtual exchange, blended).

To this purpose, the project envisaged the following intellectual outputs

- A literature review of more than a hundred and sixty studies on the impact of mobility according to type and length.
- An analysis of existing different types of mobility within HLITL partner universities, as well as of the technical conditions and core scientific areas for virtual mobility and blended mobility.
- A survey to better understand the experiences and expectations regarding the mobility of 212 students and 103 staff (academic and administrative people) from 21 Higher Education Institutions.
- Institutional recommendations for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to rethink and improve their internationalisation strategies and mobility portfolios and thus maximise the benefits of internationalisation, notably at the student level.
- Policy recommendations for a general mobility and education strategy to be applied at local, national, and European levels.

As an expected outcome, the project helps enhance the development of students and staff's key competences and skills. Universities can capitalise on the project results to enlarge their academic and mobility offer, by modernising their infrastructures and developing innovative teaching methods and material, also suitable for virtual exchange and blended mobility. This way, the project contributes to lift barriers to mobility and meet the target of 20% of students going on mobility (Bologna Process), by pointing out the key aspects for quality and inclusive mobility strategy.

Terminology

International mobility is a key way to internationalise higher education institutions (HEIs), as the latter decide to establish inter-universities agreements to organise and recognize study periods abroad within an exchange program. While this definition fully applies to physical mobility, with the arrival of new technologies, new forms of international mobility appeared:

- virtual exchange, a unique type of online learning unique form of online learning that incorporates active international or intercultural exchange and collaborative learning with peers across countries

And

- blended mobility, which mixes virtual components and physical mobility.

Although the term ‘virtual mobility’ is widely used to describe a mobility period that takes place fully online, the HLiTL consortium believes that is “conceptually ambiguous and somewhat paradoxical”¹: a mobility experience is by definition physical and not virtual. Therefore, “virtual exchange” is less confusing and it is the term adopted throughout this document.

Objective and target groups

The overall aim of this document is to provide actionable policy recommendations on mobility strategy and to define the key features for quality, successful, inclusive physical mobility, blended mobility, and virtual exchange. Being not only semantically distinct but also different in their rationales, these three mobility schemes have different requirements and targets that this document tries to consider comprehensively. The policy recommendations originate from the main findings of the HLiTL intellectual outputs, of the Research for CULT Committee of the European Parliament (DG IPOL) "*Virtual formats versus physical mobility*"², and from the results of ESN students’ survey 2021, a Europe-wide research project covering different topics concerning mobility and education, this year

¹ Erdei, L. A. & Káplár-Kodácsy, K. (2020), *International Student Mobility at a Glance – Promising Potential and Limiting Barriers of Non-traditional Mobility*, How Long is Too Long Project’s Desk Research Report, p. 55

² This short briefing paper is part of the study into effective measures to ‘green’ the Erasmus+, Creative Europe and European Solidarity Corps programmes, which aims to provide input for the CULT Committee own-initiative report (“INI report”) on effective measures to “green” the CULT programmes.

focusing on **the core elements of student mobility** and paying special attention to the effect of COVID-19 on the mobility experience.

These recommendations address the following target groups:

- The European Commission, particularly DG EAC
- The European Parliament
- The National Agencies for Erasmus+ and Ministries for Education and Youth
- The European Association of Universities, University Networks and Alliances, and National Rectors' Conferences
- Students and their representation bodies

The possible effects of these recommendations might reinforce the [ones targeting Higher Education Institutions](#).

Lessons learned and HLiTL findings

The HLiTL project was conceived to shed light on the different types of mobility and their lengths, with the purpose of understanding if any of those elements influence the development of students' competences. The project's main findings have been summarised in the following pages. The author of the document invites all interested stakeholders to further investigate the issues below by consulting the [related documents](#) on the project's website.

1. Literature review

Making mobility a reality for all and improving the quality and efficiency of education and training are priorities shared by the European Institutions and key elements to reinforce the cooperation in this field³. Despite the objective of doubling the proportion of HE students completing a study or training period abroad to 20 percent by 2020, HEIs strove to develop internationalisation and broaden mobility opportunities⁴.

³ Chircop D., Briefing on *The European Education Area and the 2030 strategic framework for education and training* [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690630/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)690630_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/690630/EPRS_BRI(2021)690630_EN.pdf)

⁴ Erdei, L. A. & Káplár-Kodácsy, K. (2020), *International Student Mobility at a Glance – Promising Potential and Limiting Barriers of Non-traditional Mobility*, Desk research report, [How Long Is too Long project](#)

The reasons why students do not or cannot go on mobility are different: working capacity issues, lack of knowledge concerning the mobility's benefits, fear of going abroad, physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities, employment obligations, strict university programs⁵. The new Erasmus Programme, started in 2021, and the challenges that arose because of the Covid-19 pandemic make it possible to adapt programmes and practices of higher education institutions (HEI), including a variety of lengths and mobility types.

The first intellectual output of HLiTL project, *International Student Mobility at a Glance, Promising Potential and Limiting Barriers of Non-traditional Mobility*, provides a literature analysis concerning the benefits and impacts of international student mobility according to:

- the length of mobility (short-term mobility - 1 week to 3 months; semester mobility - from 3 to 6 months; long-term mobility - from 6 to 12 months)
- the modality of mobility (physical, blended, virtual exchange)

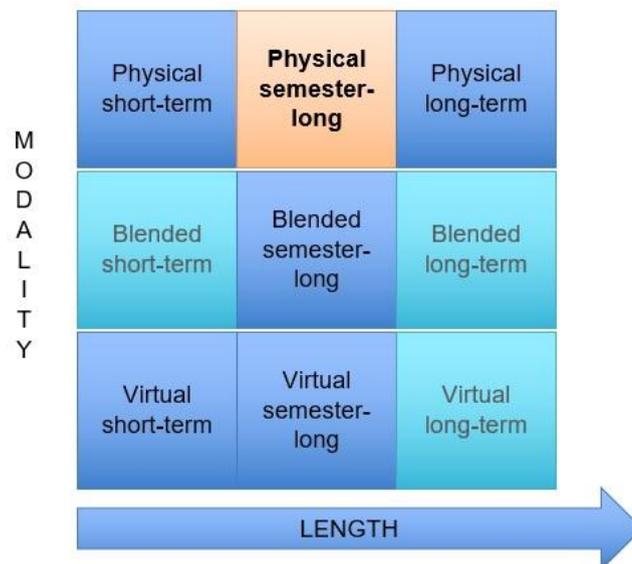


Figure - Matrix of international student mobility types with regard to length and modality

1.1 Competences and skills of traditional mobility

It is important to investigate how much the development of skills and competences differ between short and longer mobility.

The analysis of the literature reveals that **intercultural competence**, sometimes referred to as intercultural communication competence⁶, **and intercultural sensitivity**, which is an “individual’s response to cultural differences and perspectives of people from other cultures”⁷ **develop significantly during semester-long programmes compared to shorter ones**⁸ and have a more significant and longer-lasting effect on students, although intensive,

⁵ Ibid., 13

⁶ Erdei, L. A., & Káplár-Kodácsy, K. (2020), *International Student Mobility at a Glance, Promising Potential and Limiting Barriers of Non-traditional Mobility*, Desk research report, [How Long Is too Long project](#), p. 25

⁷ Clarke, I., Flaherty, T. B., Wright, N. D., & McMillen, R. M. (2009). *Student intercultural proficiency from study abroad programs*. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 31(2), 173– 181, p. 175

⁸ Ibid., p. 30

well designed and facilitated programs can be successful if not shorter than 18 days⁹ or six weeks¹⁰. "Results suggest that the longer students stay immersed in a target culture, the more they learn and grow, and the more their intercultural sensitivity develops"¹¹. Therefore, while international experiences have a positive value, the length of the study abroad affects the relevance of the change.

Intercultural awareness and cultural awareness – referring to the “students’ ability to understand and adapt to cultures other than their own, the second to the students’ increased understanding of their own culture resulting from comparing it to the host culture and from looking at it from the outside”¹² – **can be developed through the border crossing and multiple occasions for intercultural contact-making. Mobility also develops global mindedness** – how “an individual feels connected to the global community and to its members”¹³ - which is an important asset either in international and intercultural learning or working environment. A study, built on the results of a questionnaire adapting the Global Mindedness Scale with the involvement of former students of short-term (less than 8 weeks) and semester-long programmes, indicates that **semester-long mobility students showed significantly higher global-mindedness scores than non-mobile students and a greater increase score compared to the short-term ones**¹⁴. Nevertheless, the latter can guarantee cultural immersion and interaction with native speakers, and thus trigger the transformative learning of students¹⁵, if it includes collaborative work and extra-class activities, as well as time for self-reflection. Nevertheless, predictably, longer programmes expose students to more opportunities for meeting local culture and are “significantly more likely to increase their self-awareness, to develop ethics and values, and to grow in appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism”¹⁶

Language competences

As expected, language competences are strongly associated with international student mobility programmes. “Former Erasmus students and other internationally **mobile students felt 3 times as strong in foreign language proficiency** than did formerly non-mobile

⁹ Strange, H., & Gibson, H. J. (2017). *An investigation of experiential and transformative learning in study abroad programs*. In *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 29 (1), 85–100.

¹⁰ Dwyer, M. M. (2004). *More Is Better: The Impact of Study Abroad Program Duration*. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 10, 151–163.

¹¹ Medina–López–Portillo, A. (2004). *Intercultural Learning Assessment: The Link between Program Duration and the Development of Intercultural Sensitivity*. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 10, 179–199, p. 191-192

¹² Ingraham, E. C., & Peterson, D. L. (2004). *Assessing the Impact of Study Abroad on Student Learning at Michigan State University*. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, 10, 83–100, p. 94

¹³ Roy, A., Newman, A., Ellenberger, T., & Pyman, A. (2019). *Outcomes of international student mobility programs: a systematic review and agenda for future research*. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(9), 1630–1644, p. 1633

¹⁴ Kehl, K., & Morris, J. (2007). *Differences in Global-Mindedness between Short-Term and Semester-Long Study Abroad Participants at Selected Private Universities at Selected Private Universities*. *The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*. 15, 67–79.

¹⁵ Clapp-Smith, R., & Wernsing, T. (2014). *The transformational triggers of international experiences*. *Journal of Management Development*, 33(7), 662–679.

¹⁶ Neppel, J. M. (2005). *Study Abroad as a Passport to Student Learning: Does the Duration of the Study Abroad Program Matter?*, University of Maryland, (p. 102)

students”¹⁷. **Out-of-class contact**, whether interactive (with host families and friends) or non-interactive (going to the theatre, cinema, listening to music, etc.), **plays a critical role in second language acquisition**, [...] as “the individual is fully immersed within that society and, therefore, encouraged to function as other citizens”¹⁸. The results do not agree, instead, about the best length of mobility experience to develop this competence.

Personal and social competences

According to other studies, areas of personal development, such as confidence¹⁹, interpersonal and communication skills, as well as an increased consciousness of European identity may be experienced **as a consequence of international student mobility (ISM)**. Moreover, social and **civic competences are among the three most prominent types of core competences that are developed through student mobility**²⁰. Compared to both non-mobile groups of students as well as short-term international programmes’ students (less than 3 months), students of semester mobility significantly develop their social and civic competences. However, another study suggests that some other skills, such as curiosity, leadership, and work ethic, and the **development of teamwork, were actually negatively affected by length, suggesting them as an area of strength for shorter-term programmes**²¹. Additionally, “as a result of short programmes, students indicated significant gains in some areas of personal growth and development such as adaptability, flexibility, patience, responsibility, respect for others, and appreciation for the arts”, as well as reported increase in their confidence and motivation to participate in long-term mobilities afterwards. Therefore, short term mobilities may act as triggers for participation in longer-term mobility activities, thus promoting the combination of those opportunities throughout the student journey might be seen as an important initiative for universities.

Professional competences

Numerous studies²² stress the importance of **semester-long mobility for professional development**, an opinion that both former Erasmus students and employers agree on. Moreover, “according to the ratings by employers, internationally experienced graduates have a higher competence level not only of those competencies which can be directly linked

¹⁷ Teichler, U., & Janson, K. (2007). *The professional value of temporary study in another European country: Employment and work of former ERASMUS students*. Journal of Studies in International Education, 11(3–4), 486–495, p. 464

¹⁸ Jacobone, V., & Moro, G. (2015). *Evaluating the impact of the Erasmus programme: skills and European identity*. Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 40(2), 309–328, p. 326

¹⁹ Sachau, D., Brasher, N., & Fee, S. (2010). *Three models for short-term study abroad*. Journal of Management Education, 34(5), 645–670, and Weibl, G. (2015). *Cosmopolitan Identity and Personal Growth as an Outcome of International Student Mobility at Selected New Zealand, British and Czech Universities*. Journal of International Mobility, 1(3), 31–44.

²⁰ Kumpikaite, V., & Duoba, K. (2011). *Development of Intercultural Competencies by Student Mobility*. The Journal of Knowledge Economy & Knowledge Management, VI(Spring), 41–50.

²¹ Farrugia, C., & Sanger, J. (2017). *Gaining an Employment Edge: The Impact of Study Abroad on 21st Century Skills & Career Prospects in the United States*, p. 15

²² DeGraaf, D., Slagter, C., Larsen, K., & Ditta, E. (2013). *The Long-term Personal and Professional Impacts of Participating in a Study Abroad Program*; Marcotte, C., Desroches, J., & Poupart, I. (2007). *Preparing internationally minded business graduates: The role of international mobility programs*. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 31(6), 655–668; Teichler, U., & Janson, K. (2007). *The professional value of temporary study in another European country: Employment and work of former ERASMUS students*. Journal of Studies in International Education, 11(3–4), 486–495.

to international work tasks but also with respect to academic knowledge and skills, and general competencies like adaptability, initiative, assertiveness, decisiveness, persistence, written communication skills, analytical competences, problem-solving ability, planning, coordinating and organising"²³. Some studies suggest that 6 weeks, or even 4 weeks programs can produce important academic and career outcomes.

1.2 Non-traditional modality: virtual exchange

Virtual exchange is a form of online learning that includes an international and intercultural component. It is connected to the concept of open education, an important element of the European higher education policy agenda. It allows one to follow education anywhere, for free or at lower fees than traditional universities. "However, the expectations and rhetoric around virtual mobility initiatives have tended to overestimate its potential to democratise education, as is often the case in the field of educational technologies at large"²⁴.

Meaning

Truthfully, it must be said that this kind of experience is usually called "virtual mobility" in Europe and this is the term habitually used by European institutions and in European literature, while "collaborative online international learning" (COIL) is most popular in the USA. However, as already explained at the beginning of this document, "virtual exchange" is a less ambiguous definition preferred by the HLiTL consortium members. To understand better what this term means, it might be useful to refer to Erasmus Virtual Exchange project 2018-2020²⁵:

Virtual Exchange differs from other forms of online learning because it

- Primarily focus on people-to-people interaction and dialogue whereas the primary focus in many e-learning programmes is on content
- The learning goals or outcomes include soft skills that are often not formally recognized
- It is primarily learner-led; participants will be seeking mutual understanding and co-creating knowledge, based on their own experiences.

Characteristics

Specifying the meaning behind terms helps to understand what a Virtual Exchange entails. Literature does not agree on this point, but it is possible to list several components:

- Activities (courses, seminars, internships, study programs) jointly organised by two or more universities thus allowing virtual crossing borders and multicultural exchange

²³ Bracht, O., Engel, C., Janson, K., Over, A., Schomburg, H., & Teichler, U. (2006). *The Professional Value of ERASMUS Mobility*, p. 104

²⁴ Villar-Onrubia, D., & Rajpal, B. (2016). *Online international learning: Internationalising the curriculum through virtual mobility at Coventry University*. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 20(2–3), 75–82, p. 78

²⁵ https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/about-virtual-exchange_en

- Internet-connected, web-based, ICT-supported tools allowing synchronous or asynchronous communication, and students' engagement
- Student participation while being enrolled and obtaining credit at their academic institution
- Student evaluation
- Short-term or long-term delivery

Given these main characteristics, it is clear that physical **mobility and virtual exchange are not interchangeable, and the latter cannot include the level of social interaction that characterises the former**. Cultural immersion, first-hand experience in foreign country, and taking time for self-reflections are distinguishable features of physical mobility. Therefore, virtual exchange programmes are less likely to provide the same transformational learning environment. However, this does not mean that virtual exchanges do not provide any benefits at all: social, interpersonal, intercultural, multilingual as well as subject-specific, academic and technological skills are found in virtual exchanges experiences.²⁶ Nevertheless, **the depth of competence development is not discussed in detail in the literature reviewed and neither given sufficient evidence regarding the intercultural learning capacities of virtual exchange and physical mobility for a thorough comparison**. Therefore, while it can be recognized that **virtual exchanges have intercultural development potential, especially compared to no mobility experience, "the depth of this development, as well as its efficiency compared to physical mobility, needs broader scientific exploration**. This conclusion furthermore questions the validity of those articles that suggest that virtual exchange can be an alternative of physical mobility, but without using comparative data that would support this statement.²⁷

1.3 Non-traditional modality: blended mobility

Blended mobility combines physical and virtual exchange based on a learning experience, resulting mainly in physical mobility supported by the online exchange, or mainly in a virtual exchange supported by physical mobility. The opinions on this modality differ. Optimistically, "the advantages of a (short or long) immersion are combined with the advantages of flexible implementation of mobility, capturing both the benefits of physical and virtual mobility"²⁸. Others are concerned about the cultural challenges, whether if related to other peers or the host organisation, which cannot be easily faced online²⁹. Intercultural preparation of blended mobile students during and structured follow-up activities after the entire mobility experience seems to be essential for the successful implementation of such blended programmes³⁰.

²⁶ Erdei, L. A., & Káplár-Kodácsy, K. (2020). *International Student Mobility at a Glance, Promising Potential and Limiting Barriers of Non-traditional Mobility*, Desk research report, [How Long Is too Long project](#), p.66

²⁷ Erdei, L. A., & Káplár-Kodácsy, K. (2020). *International Student Mobility at a Glance, Promising Potential and Limiting Barriers of Non-traditional Mobility*, Desk research report, [How Long Is too Long project](#), p. 75

²⁸ Henderikx, P., & Ubachs, G. (2019). *Innovative Models for Collaboration and Student Mobility in Europe: Results of EADTU's Task Force and Peer Learning Activity on Virtual Mobility*, p. 14

²⁹ Welzer, T., Družovec, M., Escudeiro, N., & Hölbl, M. (2018). *Intercultural challenges in blended learning and blended mobility*. ITHET 2018: 17th International Conference on Information Technology Based Higher Education and Training (ITHET): April 26-28, 2018, Olhao, Portugal.

³⁰ *Ibidem*

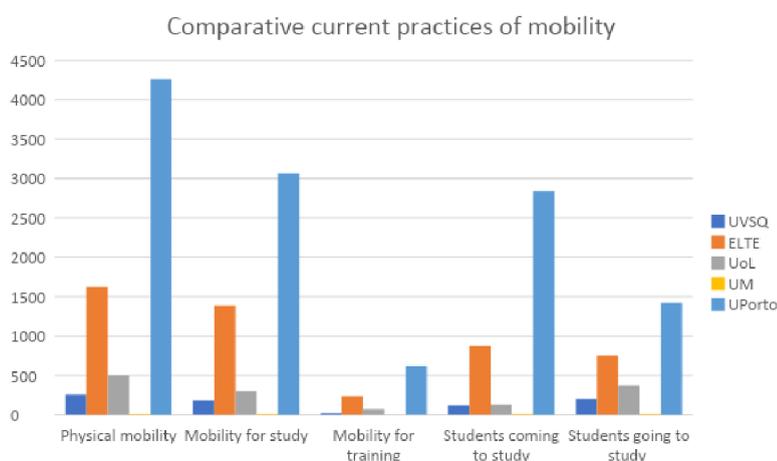
Although blended mobility opportunities diversify the offer of mobility opportunities, there is scarce evidence available regarding the competence development potential of blended mobility³¹.

2. Different types of virtual and blended mobility and their technical conditions

Having explored the different mobility schemes of the literature review, the How Long Is Too Long project focused its attention on the technical and practical requirements of virtual/blended mobility (video conference facilities, computers, software) and of the need for trained staff to implement new forms of teaching. For this purpose, two surveys have been conducted among the universities of the consortium: the first one on mobility practices and the second one on the identification of core scientific areas for virtual and blended mobility. A quantitative approach was used for both surveys, while a qualitative approach (written interviews with teachers) allowed further analysis of virtual exchanges practices and challenges.

2.1 Type of mobility and technical equipment

The findings show that the most implemented mobility, in the consortium universities, is the traditional one (physical), while all three mobility forms (physical, blended and virtual) cover undergraduate, graduate, master, and doctoral levels and are funded by Erasmus+, Government, and Regional Country grants. While physical mobility holds its importance across all universities, its direction differs: for Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) and University of Porto (UPorto) the physical mobility is mainly incoming, while for Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ) it is outgoing.



The recognition and support of mobility are done by several services and internal regulations that frame physical mobility. Although there is more reliance or confidence in physical mobility than in blended or virtual mobility, partners recognized several advantages and disadvantages for the three mobility modalities.

³¹Erdej, L. A., & Káplár-Kodácsy, K. (2020). *International Student Mobility at a Glance, Promising Potential and Limiting Barriers of Non-traditional Mobility*, Desk research report, [How Long Is too Long project](#), p.82

All partners are technically equipped to implement virtual mobility programmes: they all have their Learning Management System (LMS) hosted in-house servers, and a technical team supporting both the LMS, and the related teaching and learning methodologies, and training teachers on using the LMS. However, registration in the LMS system is not mandatory (except at UoL for teachers).

All partners use video conference tools, almost all have rooms or facilities equipped for video conferences, and studios for video and audio production, except for ELTE and UoL respectively. Streaming software in use is Panopto (UVSQ, ELTE, UPorto), POD (UVSQ), MS Team, and Webex (ELTE), while computer and online-based exams are carried out mainly through the Moodle platform or others such as Zoom, Collaborate, Compilatio, and MS Teams.

2.2 Core scientific areas for virtual exchange and blended mobility

All respondents agree that all scientific areas are suitable for the implementation of virtual mobility programmes, although it is assumed that the **social sciences present fewer obstacles than the health and life sciences and technology** since the latter involve substantial practical courses and field activities. The former are considered to have more impact, as they are *easier to pick up and relate to for the students as these fields bear a great potential for discussion, for sharing political perspectives and competencies*. In this regard, interviewees specifically mentioned topics such as economic development, ethics, ecology, climate change and loss of biodiversity, LGBT [rights], technological disruption and artificial intelligence, global health management, and European citizenship.

Despite the domain, **good organisation, creativity, innovation, and supervision** are considered key elements for the success of virtual mobility programmes. If any area of study is likely to benefit from greater internationalisation, programmes with an international profile are advantaged in terms of impact. All respondents agree that teachers, but even students, need technical knowledge and skills to make appropriate use of virtual environments and protect laboratory data and research connected to virtual environments. Last but not least, an interviewee mentioned that while the technology, in general, has improved significantly and can reach out to all students, there is nothing that the virtual exchanges can do in case of lack of technological infrastructures or blocked access to the internet or Western technology.

2.3. Blended mobility testing phase

As part of the HLiTL project, a Master's seminar "Travel and Health in North American and British Literature" was originally designed to have a Virtual Exchange (VE) through a joint seminar and physical mobility in the form of a Winter School at University of Porto (Porto, Portugal). The objective of the joint seminar was to test how an online component can help effectively prepare students for physical mobility, how VE is accepted by students and how it could be used to increase students' engagement in Erasmus+ or other forms of mobility. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19 restrictions, the physical mobility could not be implemented. For the same reason, the professors from the University of Versailles Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines (USVQ) and University of Marburg (UM) were exclusively allowed to teach remotely, while the University of Porto (U.Porto) was able to offer a blended format, which translated into having their students in the classroom and live-streaming the class to others universities.

The pilot course involved students and academic staff from three HLiTL consortium partners (University of Versailles Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines, University of Marburg, and University of Porto). The joint seminar's central objective was to teach in students' physical classrooms through a video conference system and let them interact and work virtually with students and professors from the two other participating universities.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic forced the HLiTL pilot experience to be fully distance-based rather than blended, the participants' feedback and following partners' recommendations are useful to understand the benefits and challenges of virtual exchanges that need to be addressed by the institutions willing to promote virtual formats.

2.3.1 Strengths

- Learning in an international environment while saving time (*and money?* Ed), as there is no need to travel and it is possible to attend classes from anywhere;
- Delivering a code of conduct (netiquette) to make everyone know what to expect and be comfortable in this new learning scenario;
- Planning meaningful activities for strict time frames;
- Providing an introductory synchronous session for all participants to get to know each other and get acquainted with the course syllabus and the professors;

2.3.2 Weaknesses

- Different time zones and semester class plans between partners;
- Inability to test in a classroom setting (except for University of Porto);
- Inefficiency due to technological issues from each presenter and technical issues difficulties (personal computer, mobile device, unstable internet connection);
- Impossibility to interact as a class with teachers or class members;
- Lack of a common learning platform for sharing learning material
- Hindered discussion flow as there was no possibility of actually talking to and seeing other students, since the group was too large;
- Lack of real interaction and meaningful social interaction (neither students nor professors);
- Lack of professional and networking connections between students.

2.3.3. Recommendations for a virtual exchange

Institutional

- Having a technical and pedagogical support team specialised in e-learning and blended-learning;
- Providing training and support materials for teachers and learners;
- Ensuring that all the participating students can get course credits recognized;
- Fostering dissemination by working closely with the International Offices;
- Providing sufficient time for students to enrol;
- Physical and digital infrastructure;
- Use of a Learning Management System (LMS);
- Providing digital tools (videoconference, lecture capture, etc.), preferably integrated with the LMS in use;

Course information and structure

- Establish a training programme to develop and/or improve the digital skills and teaching methodologies all staff taking part in the course;
- Providing an accurate and detailed description of the course, including syllabus and learning outcomes, and language of delivery;
- Providing students with the opportunity to ask questions/doubts regarding the course (content, structure, recognition, assessment, etc.);
- Considering different time zones and school calendars when designing the course;
- Considering available technical conditions within all partners and the need to update them;

Contents, classes, and interaction

- Institutional agreement on the pedagogical content to use before the courses' start;
- Acknowledging the international and multi-cultural component of the course;
- Foster a communicative and engaging learning environment for students;
- Ensuring a balanced interaction between participants by guaranteeing a similar number of students per institution;
- Keep meaningful interaction between international peers at the core of the course design;

Activities and assessment

- Common agreement on students evaluation methods before the courses' start, so that the students know how they will be assessed (individual or workgroup assignments, essays, presentations, quizzes, final exam or others);
- Dedicating time for collaborative group work to offer students the opportunity to share knowledge and different experiences;
- Explaining clearly the task objectives before any learning activity;
- Providing meaningful feedback on students' performance, especially at the mid-term period, to maximise learning outcomes for students and to address potential issues.

To sum up the results of this testing phase, it is important to stress that local and mobile students, teaching, and non-teaching staff need suitable pedagogical, technical, and intercultural tools and be trained to provide quality educational materials and experiences in both physical and virtual environments. Moreover, physical and digital infrastructures have to be updated to provide quality learning materials and attendees' effective communication. It is important to remark that International offices play a decisive role in fostering inter-institutional cooperation and students' participation. In conclusion, *topics such as enrollment, fees, recognition of academic credits, among others, are equally important to students' overall experience and should not be underestimated when thinking about student mobility.*³²

³² University of Porto and the European University Foundation, *Handbook of good practices*, [How Long is Too Long](#), p.8

3. Traditional, blended and digital learning within mobility, meeting the challenges and expectations

The third stage of the project consisted of a survey based on questionnaires – one for university students (160 students) and the other for university staff (103 between academics and administrative) – and focus group interviews with 78 university students across Europe. The aim was to identify the impact of various mobility schemes on students and staff, by analyzing the experiences and expectations of the target groups.

3.1 Questionnaires' findings related to students

The report shows that digital learning within the mobility programme supports students' motivation to learn and, as it happens for the traditional learning opportunities, to develop students' resilience and adaptability. These online courses are pedagogically innovative and, as such, push students to adapt to a challenging academic environment and help them to become more autonomous in their learning, and more willing to open up to challenges encountered in various educational settings.

Participation in virtual exchanges is perceived as more advantageous by students for economic and career factors: no accommodation costs in a foreign country and a qualification that would make students stand out in the labor market. In traditional mobility, students become part of international communities, they immerse themselves in a new cultural environment and the learning experience focuses on extra-curricula activities and social, interpersonal, and academic skills perceived as a personal success. Virtual exchanges, instead, focus more on curricular activities, increasing knowledge and skills in the chosen study field.

In terms of length, learning by digital tools characterizes shorter mobility schemes (2 weeks to 2 months), while traditional learning is more common for the mid-term mobility schemes (2-6 months).

3.2 Questionnaires' findings related to University staff

Given the rhythm of changes in workplace conditions and functioning, "the traditional (bureaucratic) model of the university has been replaced by a management model. It has become important to improve the quality of officials' work by increasing student orientation, supporting researchers, and increasing efficiency in obtaining grants. The implementation of these demands requires new knowledge, skills, competencies, and styles of administration from administrative staff and education from teachers"³³. Short-term mobility, not longer than 2 weeks, is the preferred option to boost learning among the staff of this study's sampling. The study indicates **international experience as the main benefit of physical**

³³ Leek, J. & Rojek, M. (2021), Research report, *Traditional, Blended And Digital Learning Within Mobility – Meeting The Challenges And Expectations*, [How Long is Too Long](#), p.14

mobility, and digital skills and professional knowledge as the main benefits gained from digital and blended mobility. The best impressions and experiences come from physical mobility, while the remaining forms of mobility were rated much lower: blended and virtual mobility is beneficial in some respects, but does not substitute physical mobility; it is a complementary option rather than an alternative.

3.3 Focus groups interviews

The participants in the study were 78 higher education students from 10 countries (12 universities) involved in mobility in Europe (9 countries) and outside Europe (1 country) within the last 18 months. 67% of them took part in the survey study described in the previous paragraph. In these interviews, virtual exchanges' participants state that learning by digital tools supports the exchange for those who cannot take part in traditional mobility for financial issues. Moreover, online education offers a wide range of learning opportunities fitting the labour market's needs and their comfort needs thanks to the availability of materials.

Students who went through a virtual exchange believe that digital tools create opportunities for cultural exchange and socialisation, mainly through social media, although it does not replace face-to-face interaction. It is not surprising then that students appreciate meetings and oral exams as the opportunity to talk with classmates and/or professors. **The isolation and loneliness of the learner, as well as the risk of dependence on the virtual world, are seen as real challenges to interpersonal interaction.** Moreover, socialisation through online media is more successful if people have a good command of a foreign language, most often English, which is not always the case.

Students who participated in their mobility during the outbreak of COVID-19 and experienced lockdown in the host country reported that the home environment did not support online learning, nor the feeling of taking part in mobility exchange. During the interviews, one of the issues raised was that students needed "a place for digital learning" that is not their own home. Nevertheless, those who decided to participate in mobility abroad via digital tools and lived in dormitories with other foreign students saw their social interactions supported. It is self-evident that this depends on the courses' organisation: independence in learning is not good for all and students can struggle with attention difficulties especially when there is no group experience. Digital learning requires and relies on a high level of self-motivation, which might decrease after one semester, as reported by an interviewee.

Personal attitudes like openness towards digital learning environments are crucial to participating in international learning with online tools. When this is the case, digital tools within mobility develop motivation and focus on course content, and support self-learning and independence in searching for information. Adaptation to the new digital environment is quick and rather intuitive for those born or grown in the digital era. However, with the Covid-19 outbreak and the sudden change to online modality, students reported difficulties related to the university's work organization, teachers' skills, and lack of information about the learning platforms' use.

The interviews revealed that **group work is perceived as the optimal form of work in the digital environment**, since they support interaction between peers and teacher, especially if in small groups. Some experienced a positive change in their speaking, synthesis, and online search for information.

Last but not least, it is important to stress two aspects: a good-quality computer, high-speed internet access, and additional devices, such as a microphone and webcam, become barriers to international learning if not available; not all study fields are suited to be online and they need to be complemented by in-person courses and apprenticeship outside the university.

4. Institutional recommendations

As a result of the findings of HLiTL project, the following Institutional Recommendations targeted to European HEIs have been identified.

1. There is no "too long mobility"

The new Erasmus+ 2021-2027 programme allows going on both long and short-term mobilities but these experiences are not interchangeable in terms of impact or usefulness, as shown in the literature reviewed and the surveys carried out in this project; the impact and the added-value of one or two semesters abroad are not easily replicated or substituted through shorter exchanges. Accordingly, HEIs are advised to continue to make this kind of exchange the backbone of their international offer towards students.

2. Share your findings with the community

Short-blended programmes hold a lot of potential to stir innovation and involve faculty and academic staff deeply in international cooperation activities, such as preparatory and follow-up mobility online modules. Short-blended mobilities will help explore how creativity and interdisciplinary can be effectively enhanced, not least in study fields whose programmes are heavily regulated.

3. Foster the establishment of a measurement methodology of students' competence development before and after mobility

The type and length of the mobility are not the only elements influencing the learning outcomes: resources' availability and academics' skills level might also affect the development of students' competences. A European-wide student competence development monitoring system³⁴ can ensure the monitoring of students' competences before and after the mobility for every type of mobility (physical, blended and virtual

³⁴ As far as the HLiTL consortium knows there is no such a system yet. Nevertheless, the Erasmus Skills project provides a set of innovative tools to help Erasmus students to enhance and acknowledge the soft skills and competences gained in their mobility experience. Among them, a self-assessment questionnaire enabling students to compare their competencies before and after mobility. Although this tool merely informs students about the learning outcomes of their mobility, it might be used by institutions as a starting point to develop the above-mentioned monitoring system. This tool is available on the [Erasmus Skills project's website](#).

exchange) at institutional level while being consistent and homogeneous across European HEIs.

4. Terminology matters

The term “virtual exchange” should be preferable to “virtual mobility”, as the former emphasises the experiential aspect and active intercultural interaction between participants, which remain closer to the core of International Student Mobility. Virtual mobility is understood as a type of cross-border e-learning³⁵ and therefore this term should not be used in the context of international student mobility³⁶.

5. Unleash the full potential of European University Alliances

The European University Alliances are European-wide university clusters, supported by the Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020 programmes, which aim at revolutionising the quality and competitiveness of European higher education. It would be indisputably important if they could set-up pilot testing to gather and deliver primary data on different mobility types and lengths, and their impact on students’ competences.

6. Consider your students’ needs when designing international strategies

Demographic, socio-economic, or cultural differences (among other factors) might affect the mobility preferences and/or needs of certain students. To make mobility as accessible as possible, it is essential to consider students’ needs and foster a more individualised approach to each student's personal and professional situation at the institutional level, given the currently rigid institutional student mobility procedures.

7. Provide higher education staff with the necessary skills to maximise the advantages of the new Erasmus+ programme

Different student mobility formats have their educational design processes, and they require diverse human and technical resources. The sudden shift to the digital world because of the COVID-19 pandemic made it clear that adapting to online tools and environments is not always straightforward. Successful online activities with international students require better pedagogical methodologies, intercultural know-how, and technological resources. Therefore, it is crucial that HEIs actively support the design, development, and implementation of internal training programmes to improve the technical and teaching skills of their staff and facilitate the implementation of blended mobility and/or virtual exchange programmes.

5. Policy recommendations for European and National stakeholders

5.1 Introduction

The How Long is Too Long (HLITL) project aims at optimising mobility in higher education (HE) in Europe and finding the most effective mobility schemes to improve students’ and

³⁵ Definition of virtual mobility - [ECTS Users’ Guide, 2015](#).

³⁶ EAIE Blog: Words Matter: why we should stop talking about “virtual mobility” Van Hove, P. (2021) <https://www.eaie.org/blog/words-matter-virtual-mobility.html>

staff skills, by considering 2 variables: the **length** of the mobility and the **type** of mobility (physical, virtual, blended). **The project's findings shed light on the impossibility of simply identifying which mobility scheme is the best for all students and circumstances. There should not be a "one size fits all" approach and the growing interest in virtual formats as an educational tool should not dim the ultimate goal of exchanges: the quality of learning outcomes and interaction with other cultures.** The reality is much more complex and the lack of comparative research between virtual formats and physical mobility, as well as conflicting research findings, should make HEIs, as well as European Institutions, more cautious, attentive, diverse, and sustainably-minded when promoting new learning modalities for their internationalisation strategy, and consider these new modalities as part of a comprehensive internationalisation strategy

The promotion of international virtual internationalisation activities, virtual exchange, and blended mobility gained ground as options to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, widen the internationalisation opportunities provided by Higher Education Institutions, boost the adoption of innovative modes of teaching and learning through ICT tools³⁷. Virtual activities are considered having great potential as they tear down physical barriers and can be used to internationalise any courses and programmes. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the new Erasmus Programme (2021-2027) introducing blended formats for both long-term and short-term mobility, the debate over virtual internationalisation activities gained prominence and legitimacy³⁸, thus shaking what has always been the pillar of the Erasmus+ programme: the physical mobility scheme. The enthusiastic support to online learning forms applied in internationalisation collides not only with objective challenges but also with an indisputable truth: virtual exchange and physical mobility are different and, as such, neither of the two can be considered an alternative to the other. Rather, they complement each other.

It is worth noticing that the goal here is not to demean virtual exchanges, online learning forms, or blended mobility, but to understand to which extent and under which conditions these forms guarantee quality education and exchange experience, and why they are not interchangeable with physical mobility.

5.2 Virtual exchanges and blended mobility

The HLITL literature review showed that virtual exchanges do **provide benefits** – although the depth of competence development is not discussed in detail in the literature – and **diversify the learning exchange offer**. However, they **cannot replace the cultural immersion**, first-hand experience in a foreign country, and the social interaction with the local community that distinguishes physical mobility. Moreover, to meet students' expectations, digital learning environments should create the **conditions for social**

³⁷ Bert-Jan Buiskool and Marye Hudepohl, *Virtual formats versus physical mobility*, Concomitant expertise for INI report, Research for CULT Committee, European Parliament briefing, 2020

³⁸ AA.VV, *Bringing the student perspective to the debate on mobility, virtual exchange & blended learning*, Joint position paper by the European Students' Union and the Erasmus Student Network, 2021

interaction, and HEIs' staff should be knowledgeable about online pedagogy and ready to assist students in using ICT tools. Indeed, physical mobility keeps its core importance when we look at the students' perception of social competences as outlined by the ESN Survey 2021 (see paragraph below).

This means that virtual exchange should have the **same quality requirements** across Europe. Therefore, European Institutions should offer **clear guidance about the standards** and features that virtual exchanges should have, but also directing Erasmus+ and other relevant funds to foster staff training and the development of good practices. This would allow having a **Common European Framework to set competence and skills development standards and a common assessment methodology**.

The literature and students' perceptions (ESN Survey 2021) do not indicate that virtual exchanges can replace physical mobility. Therefore virtual internationalisation activities **“cannot be used as a discount substitute to reach mobility quotas”³⁹, thus selling as inclusive a modality that cannot always be considered as such**. Rather, access to high-quality international education, including physical mobility, should be widened for all. **Virtual exchange should be an option and not an unavoidable choice**. Non-mobile students often do not participate in mobility programmes because of their socio-cultural background and status, disabilities and chronic diseases, family and parental obligations, financial issues or language proficiency⁴⁰. It means **that equity and not only equality should orient the mobility programmes**. European Institutions should reflect on how and when it is possible to shatter these barriers rather than bypass them and, thus, consider virtual exchanges as boosters and incentives to physical mobility. Similarly, blended mobility should also be used to understand how it is possible to incentivize students to participate in long-term physical mobility later in their studies and understand which are the constraints that restrained their participation beforehand. Moreover, the above-mentioned call for common European standards applies to blended mobility – combining mobility with synchronous virtual learning activities - especially since opinions on the matter differ and there is scarce evidence available about its competence development potential⁴¹. Once again, the enlargement of internationalisation offer is welcomed but the quality of the online delivery must be guaranteed and the outcomes comparable to those of physical learning.

³⁹ AA.VV, *Bringing the student perspective to the debate on mobility, virtual exchange & blended learning*, Joint position paper by the European Students' Union and the Erasmus Student Network, 2021, p.3

⁴⁰ K. Allison, W. Gabriels, “Maybe it will be different abroad.” Student and Staff Perspectives on Diversity and Inclusion in student exchanges”, [SIEM project](#), 2021 and Souto-Otero, Manuel, Gehlke, Anna, Basna, Kristyna, Dóka, Ádám, Endrodi, Gabor, Favero, Luca, Humburg, Martin, Jantoš, Milan, Key, Olivia, Oberheidt, Stephanie and Stiburek, Šimon 2019. [Erasmus+ higher education impact study](#)

⁴¹ Erdei, L. A. & Káplár-Kodácsy, K., International Student Mobility at a Glance, Promising Potential and Limiting Barriers of Non-traditional Mobility, Desk research report, [How Long Is too Long project](#), 2020, p.82

5.3 Blended Intensive Programmes

In this regard, it is worth dedicating a special attention to [blended intensive programmes](#) (BIPs), one of the greatest novelties launched in the new Erasmus+ programme to offer more flexible physical mobility duration. These are short, intensive programmes – for students and staff as learners – that combine short-term physical mobility abroad combined with a compulsory virtual component.⁴² They envisage innovative ways of learning and teaching, including the use of online cooperation, with a challenge based learning and transdisciplinary approach. That is why the Erasmus+ guidelines stress that BIPs should have added value compared to existing courses or trainings offered by the participating higher education institutions⁴³. As per the guidelines, the virtual component must bring the learners together online to work collectively and simultaneously on specific assignments. While the duration of the virtual part is not further defined, the physical mobility must last between 5 days and 30 days. However, as suggested in HLiTL literature review, the **mobility part** of a blended learning experience **should last at least 2,5-3 weeks** to ensure a similar level of competence and skills development as it might be achievable in a semester-long period in areas of intercultural competences. As for the social and personal competences, it is essential to make an important distinction: while the more you are abroad the higher is the development of these competences, teamwork skills are impacted negatively by the length, as indicated in the literature review. To trigger students' cooperation and interaction, it might be advisable to divide the mobility in two parts and having the first at the beginning of the programme. While the length of mobility remains essential for language competences, it is less obvious, instead, to define the most advantageous mobility duration for the development of professional competences, as this depends on the learning outcomes set. Theoretically, even a very short period might be beneficial if the programme is well tailored and its aims realistic. Moreover, the BIPs entail challenges at organisation, coordination and teaching method levels that, like for virtual exchanges, need a common vision and framework applicable to all participating HEIs and that will be further discussed in the "Recommendations" paragraph of this document.

5.4 The issue of the digital divide

Whether entirely or partially online, virtual environments raise the issue of the digital divide. The so-called first digital divide is linked to access and connectivity, which may vary within a country and/or from one country to another one⁴⁴. Many policy-makers thought that this divide could have been overcome through universal physical access to the internet connection. However, a study shows that this universality does not protect against the

⁴² [Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2022](#)

⁴³ *Ibidem*

⁴⁴ Halla B. Holmarsdottir, *Technology, Education, and the Digital Generation*, FreshEd podcast, #217

second and third levels of the digital divide⁴⁵: respectively, people's readiness and skills, and the integration of technology into student learning⁴⁶. And this is true, for example, even in one of the richest and most technologically advanced countries in the world, the Netherlands. "By extending basic physical access combined with material access, the [above mentioned, ndr] study finds that diversity in access to devices and peripherals, device-related opportunities, and the ongoing expenses required to maintain the hardware, software, and subscriptions affect existing inequalities related to Internet skills, uses, and outcomes. This means that the ablest and the most well-resourced students will tend to have higher success rates. Therefore, the online modality is not exempted from generating inequalities and its adoption does not revert the known equation for which socioeconomic status is associated with better study performances⁴⁷, nor ensure a smooth learning experience. If we transpose this concept to mobility, we cannot take for granted that virtual exchange or blended mobility will predictably be more inclusive, as online learning seems to build on existing inequalities, rather than automatically solve them.

5.5 Physical mobility is inimitable and more policy efforts are needed to support it

One of the most problematic elements of the current debate on internationalisation formats is that less attention is being dedicated to widening participation in long term physical exchanges, as describes in the EHEA and EU targets for learning mobility. As the Education and Training Monitor 2018 indicated: In 2011, EU countries agreed on a target that "by 2020, an EU average of at least 20% of higher education graduates should have had a period of higher education-related study or training (including work placements) abroad, representing a minimum of 15 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits or lasting a minimum of three months"⁴⁸. "This target refers to worldwide outward mobility, i.e. mobility from EU countries to both EU and non-EU destinations. It covers two types of mobility: credit mobility and degree mobility"⁴⁹. Regrettably, due to the lack or incompleteness of inward degree mobility data for some destination countries, the computation of this target remains underestimated⁵⁰. The latest data from the Education and Training Monitor 2021 indicated that the targets were not achieved by a significant margin, and that this can not be blamed on data collection issues. Simulations by the Joint Research Centre have estimated that the data gap is lower than 1%. Therefore, the number of people who experienced international mobility is lower than agreed by Member States and monitoring these data is essential to achieve the target in the coming years.

⁴⁵ Alexander JAM van Deursen, Jan AGM van Dijk, *The first-level digital divide shifts from inequalities in physical access to inequalities in material access*, Department of Communication Science, University of Twente, 2018

⁴⁶ Halla B. Holmarsdottir, *Technology, Education, and the Digital Generation*, FreshEd podcast, #217

⁴⁷ OECD (2019), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en>

⁴⁸ Council conclusions on a benchmark for learning mobility. OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, p. 31–35, The Education and Training 2020 targets, Education and Training Monitor 2020

⁴⁹ Ivi, note 135

⁵⁰ Ivi, note 136

As 93% of the former exchange students would be interested in migrating abroad for work⁵¹, physical mobility is fundamental to boost labor mobility, a key dimension of the EU single market, and essential to build a more cohesive and diverse society. Physical mobility also remains important and inimitable thanks to its cultural immersion component, which enriches the academic experiences and contributes to students' personal and intercultural development. This is precisely the goal of most exchange programmes, including Erasmus since its appearance in 1987. The priority should be then the expansion of physical mobility opportunities by improving their accessibility, firstly financially, since, as identified by the SIEM research report⁵², students state that financial difficulties are the main reason that discourages them to go on mobility. As reported in the last Erasmus+ Higher Education Impact Study, the Erasmus+ 'traditional' physical exchange has a positive influence on students' quality of life and career perspectives⁵³, thus acting as social mobility elevator and tool to promote European identity and social cohesion⁵⁴, cultural, intercultural and social openness⁵⁵.

5.6 Focus on ESN survey on student mobility and the impact of Covid-19 pandemic

Since 2005, The Erasmus Student Network has led the ESNsurvey, a Europe-wide research project covering different topics concerning mobility and education and carried out solely by volunteers. The 2021 **edition of the ESNsurvey focused on the core elements of student mobility**⁵⁶: the experience of the students, the support they receive, and the impact that mobility has on their lives once they go back home. The survey has been developed with the valuable support of an expert group consisting of the European Commission, Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL), European Association for International Education (EAIE), Academic Cooperation Association (ACA), International Association of Universities (IAU), and Tilburg University. More than 10.000 students replied to the questionnaire and helped ESN better represent the interests of international students in this matter and then advocate for the improvements of the Erasmus+ programme.

Therefore, the survey provides first-hand results that set side by side the three internationalisation offers according to the experience of students in 2020. However, the survey has its own limitations. Due to Covid-19 outbreak, the survey include students who

⁵¹ Mikuláš Josek (ed.), Jaume Alonso i Fernández, Adriana Perez-Encinas, Bojana Zimonjić, Laura De Vocht and Marie-Céline Falisse, "[How international-friendly are our universities?](#)", ESNsurvey 2016

⁵² Allinson K., Gabriels W. (2021). [Maybe it will be different abroad: student and staff perspectives on diversity and inclusion in student exchanges](#). SIEM Research Report, siem-project.eu

⁵³ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Erasmus+ higher education impact study : final report*, Publications Office, 2019, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/184038>, p.1

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 3 and 4

⁵⁶ The 2021 edition of the ESNsurvey has not been published yet and the related data mentioned in this document are preliminary.

moved to their exchange destinations but attended classes online, or students who attended, from their home countries, courses delivered by their exchange university. Therefore, in this case, blended and virtual concept in this case might mean different things and might not be in line with the scientific and standard definitions, but it still provides interesting insights to understand students' perceptions. The data confirm some of the findings of the literature review and the assumptions related to physical mobility, and the deviations depend on the question and related issue arising.

Intercultural skills improvement after mobility

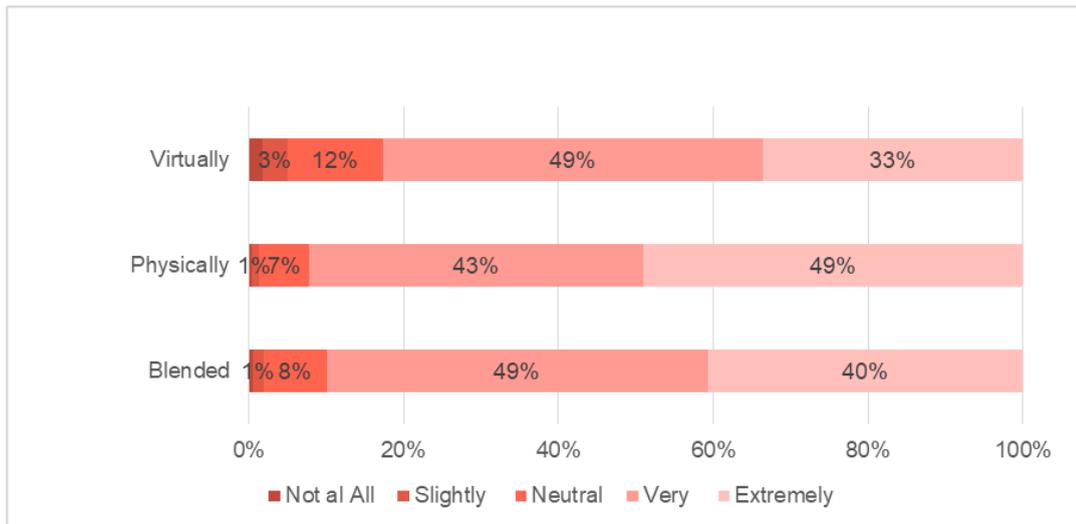


Figure 1

When asked about the improvement of their intercultural skills (figure 1), the survey reveals a 16% difference between virtual exchange and physical mobility for students who felt their skills extremely improved, although the positive effects (answer “very”) are also apparent for non-traditional mobility. Similarly, language skills improve for physical and blended mobility, whereas the students in virtual exchange overall reported more moderate effects: the ratio of respondents replying “not at all”, “slightly”, “neutral” is higher in this modality (figure 2).

Language improvements due to mobility

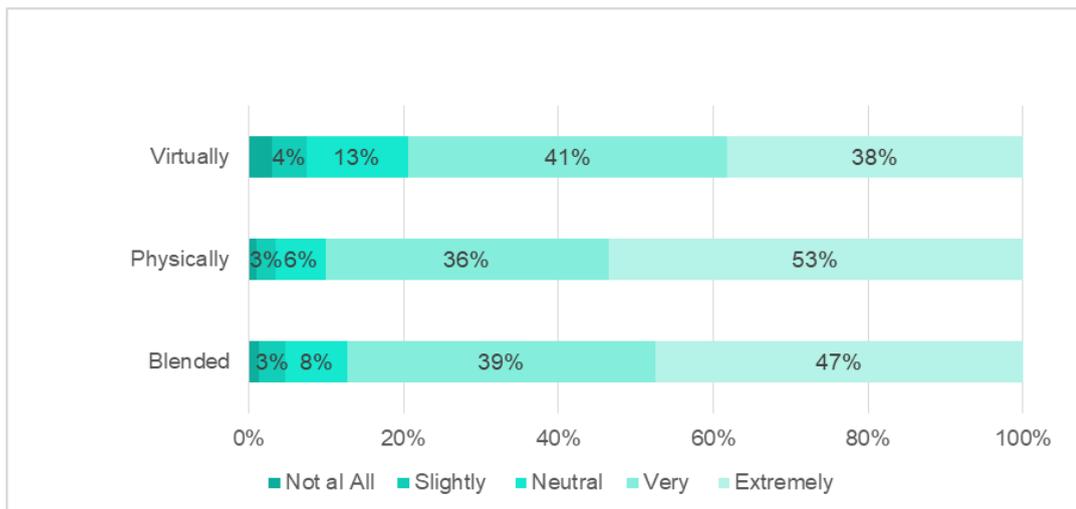


Figure 2

As already mentioned, the cultural immersion is one of the key-element of the physical mobility and shows its positive effects not only in skills development but also in the sphere of feelings and perceptions vis-à-vis the local community (figure 3), interaction with local students (figure 4), and general satisfaction with social life, where the deviation between physical mobility and virtual exchange is unsurprisingly striking for the “very satisfied” respondents (figure 5).

Feeling integrated in the local community

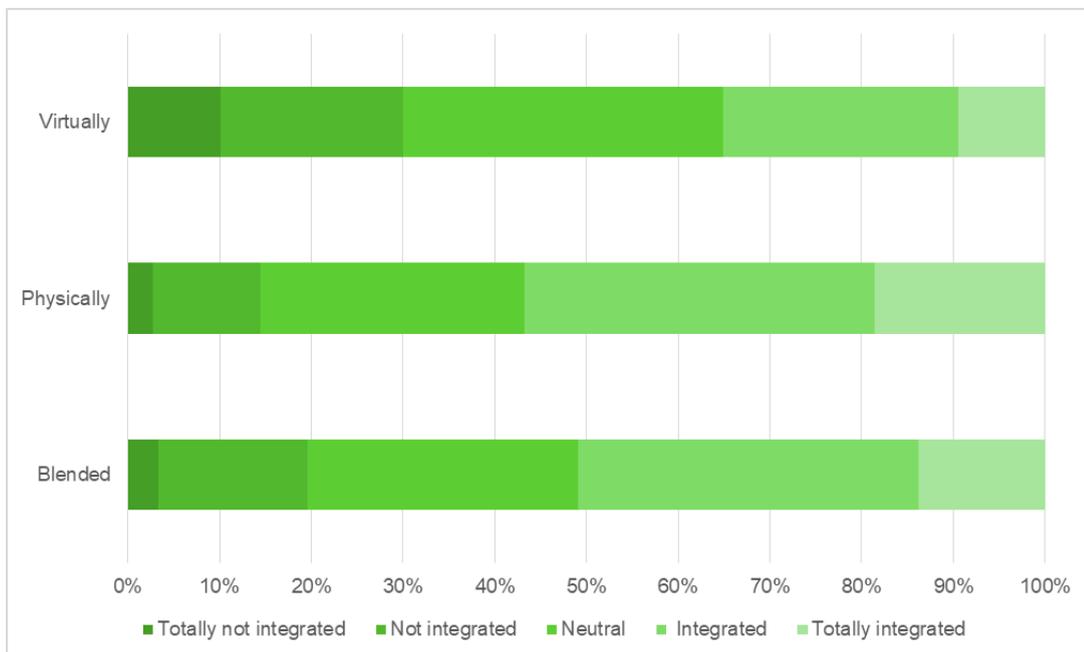


Figure 3

Interaction with local students

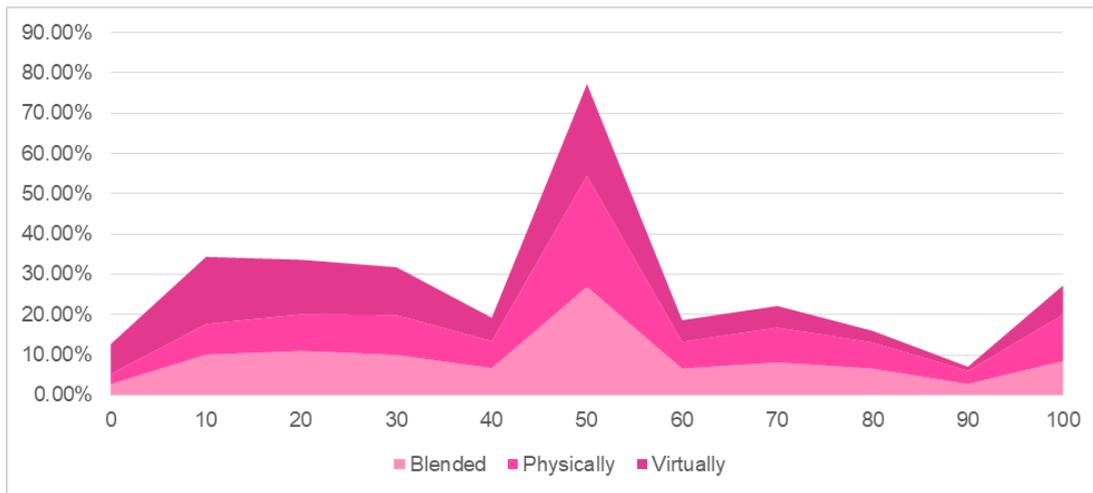


Figure 4

Satisfaction with social life

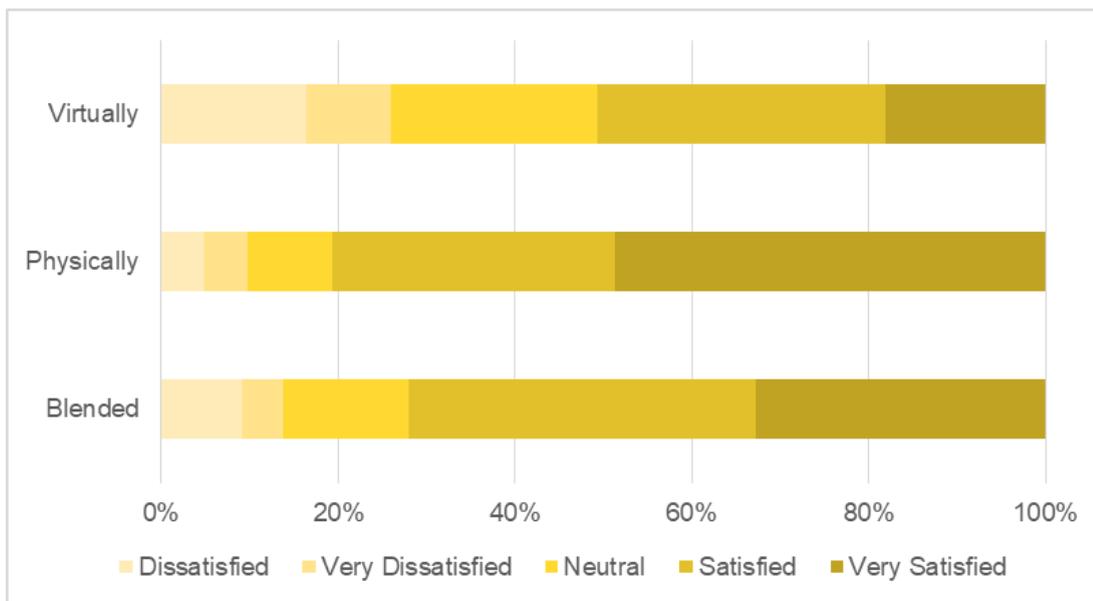


Figure 5

Identification with the EU after the Mobility

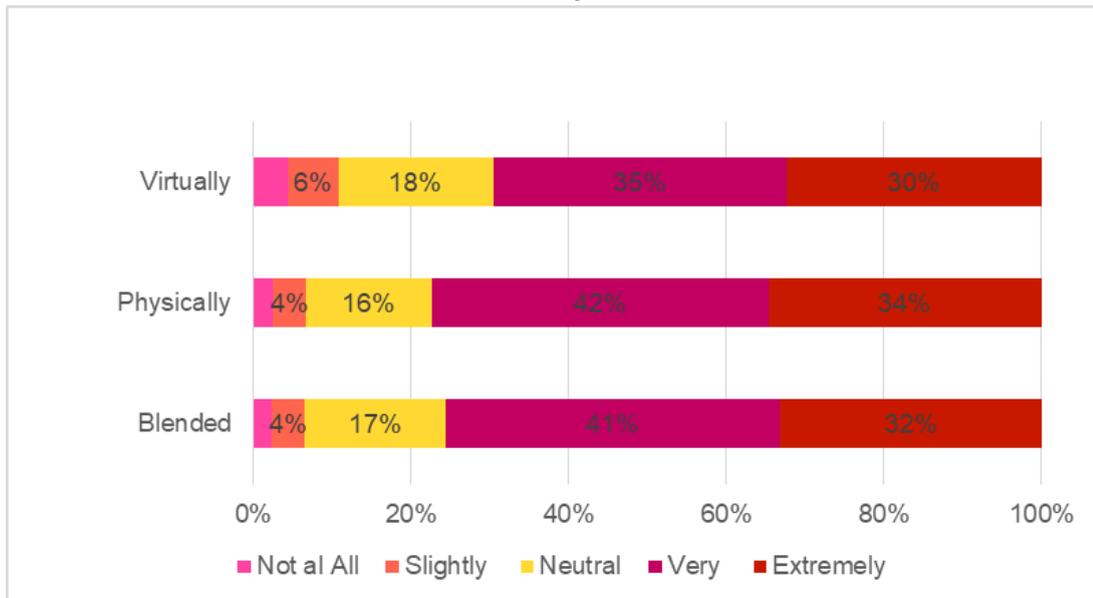


Figure 6

When it comes to students' identification with the EU after mobility, the differences are less significant, albeit present, between virtual exchange and physical mobility, while almost equivalent between the physical and blended mobility (figure 6).

Fortunately and to give credit to HEIs administrations, no substantial differences are reported with the administrative procedure for the Learning and Grant Agreement (figure 7).

Problems with the learning or grant agreement

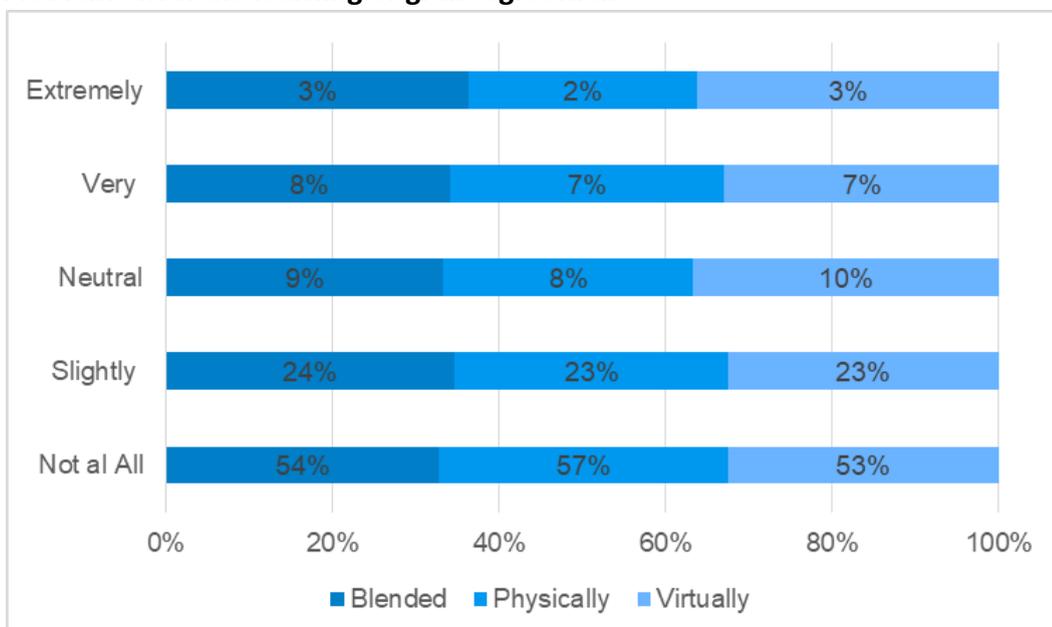


Figure 7

5.7 Recommendations

The analysis of physical, blended mobility and virtual exchanges make clear that it is not possible to declare a winner among these exchange modalities, and that the comparison is counterproductive on its own, since there is a need for comprehensive internationalisation strategies that include a variety of opportunities. As seen, many other variables, and not only the length and type of exchange, influence the achievement of competences and skills. Therefore, the recommendations below take into account the elements that play a role in considering exchanges' effectiveness.

1. European institutions and national authorities should promote the creation of comprehensive internationalisation strategies that integrate different international learning experiences. The European Commission should facilitate training and dialogue for National Authorities and HEIs in strategic planning, fostering the collaboration with student organisations and stakeholders.
2. The upcoming Learning Mobility Framework, an update of the 2011 Youth on the Move Council Recommendation, should provide guidance on the complementarity of mobility formats and its synergetic possibilities to increase the uptake in learning mobility across young people. The framework should include new learning mobility indicators and targets for Higher Education graduates and showcase best practice by member states in the progress towards the 2020 targets.
3. The monitoring of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education commitments by National Agencies should consider how Higher Education Institutions implement different internationalisation opportunities, providing guidance, support and training opportunities to institutions that need it. This should be incorporated in the new Monitoring Guide of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education.
4. As a core element in any internationalisation strategy, The European Commission and National Authorities should **encourage the increase of quality physical mobility** and its recognition, incorporating **renewed mobility targets** and comprehensive monitoring systems, as well as **broadening the participants' spectrum** and thus include the students from least represented and most disadvantaged groups.
5. Targeted **grants and support should be offered to students from the least represented and most disadvantaged groups** to reduce barriers to physical mobility. Virtual exchanges, blended mobility and blended intensive programmes should be an option but not the only one for them. European Institutions should reflect on how and when it is possible to shatter these barriers rather than bypass them and, thus, consider virtual exchanges as boosters and incentives to future physical mobility. As part of the guidance to Higher Education Institutions, the European Commission and National Agencies should encourage the addition of more internationalisation formats in the first years of the degree.

6. Virtual exchanges, blended mobility and blended intensive programmes are not per se more inclusive, unless the proper support measures are put in place. **European Commission and National Authorities should consider all the levels of the digital divide to make virtual exchanges effective and accessible.**
7. Virtual exchanges, blended and traditional mobility, should encourage west to east exchanges, and not traditional forms of mobility should include a wide range of universities to ensure good and diversified geographical coverage.
8. European Commission and National Authorities should provide HEIs with **clear guidance and a policy framework to address the challenges of virtual exchanges and the online dimension of blended programmes**, including BIPs, in terms of organization, innovation, quality assurance, technical knowledge and skills, inclusive digital pedagogical approaches and online interaction and socialization. For example, online social interaction and trust should be encouraged before assigning collaborative work. This will ensure common standards across Europe and accompany HEIs in their efforts to widen the mobility offer while guaranteeing its quality, which should be comparable to physical learning's. A new category of organisational support can be included to improve the HEI's readiness to implement these programmes.
9. It is necessary to provide HEIs with **common standards for blended mobility**. For example, the **mobility part** of an intensive blended programme **should preferably last 3 weeks or more weeks**, as suggested in HLiTL literature review, to ensure the achievement of intercultural competences and reinforced interaction with local communities and other international students. In any case, the mobility part should be **properly planned and supported before, during and after** to increase students' benefit and optimize the creative and interactive components of the course. For the same reasons, participants should receive **specific support for accommodation and integration** in the host institution as these normal challenges might increase in a short-term experience and prevent students from experiencing mobility to its full potential. Moreover, the physical part of blended and intensive blended mobility should not be reserved just for lectures but also for social time and informal ways of learning. The mobility, albeit short, should be seen as a life-cycle rather than an event itself: preparation and restitution moments are important. Student associations can play a role in this regard but they need support from institutions.
10. Although cultural immersion is not a key-element of virtual exchange, intercultural issues linger in this modality and might be even more difficult to overcome without the communication codes usable for physical mobility, such as the language body and the environmental observation. It is then important to train staff and students to acquire the necessary intercultural competences and skills in online environments.
11. The new forms of exchanges, either fully online, blended, or blended intensive programmes, should have the same quality standards of traditional mobility. Hence,

transparent and accessible information, clear learning outcomes, and courses' quality assessment should be guaranteed.

12. Given the greater international dimension of the new Erasmus+ Programme, which pave the way for further cooperation with non-associated countries, it is important that the European Commission provide common guidelines for credits recognitions, especially for exchanges involving non-EU countries.
13. The European Commission, with the cooperation of NAs and HEIs, should **monitor the data about students who opted for blended mobility, research the reasons behind their choice, and assess the impact of blended mobility on the overall mobility funds**. This would allow understanding the profile of students - if students coming from disadvantaged groups and with insufficient resources to go on mobility for example – and to avoid that blended mobility drain resources of physical mobility.

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