

# **Institutional, structural and academic barriers to international student mobility**

## **Results from the NORM survey for staff**

**Report prepared in the framework of the Erasmus+ project  
“Making Mobility the Norm”**

**by**

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Barcelona, February 15, 2021

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## 1. General information

The information presented in this report is based on the data collected from the replies to the survey “Institutional, Academic and Structural Obstacles in International Students’ Mobility” launched in October 2020. It was opened between the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2020 and the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2021. The survey was addressed to European academic and non-academic staff, and it was completed by 217 staff university members across Europe. We received responses from **more than 15 different European countries**, although they were unevenly distributed, as shown in Table 1. **Hungary, Spain, and Greece** accounted for **almost 70%** of the total answers received.

**Table 1**  
**Number of responses by country**

Country	Responses	Percentage
<b>Hungary</b>	60	27,65
<b>Spain</b>	48	22,12
<b>Greece</b>	43	19,82
<b>Germany</b>	20	9,22
<b>United Kingdom</b>	10	4,61
<b>France</b>	7	3,23
<b>Lithuania</b>	5	2,30
<b>Sweden</b>	4	1,84
<b>Ireland</b>	3	1,38
<b>Italy</b>	3	1,38
<b>Netherlands</b>	3	1,38
<b>Portugal</b>	3	1,38
<b>Belgium</b>	2	0,92
<b>Bulgaria</b>	2	0,92
<b>Norway</b>	2	0,92
<b>Croatia</b>	1	0,46
<b>Finland</b>	1	0,46
<b>Total</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>100</b>

By type of institution, a large percentage of the respondents are staff from **public universities, i.e. almost 95%**, whereas 5,53% are from private institutions.

**Table 2**  
**Type of institution**

Type of institution	Responses	Percentages
<b>Public</b>	205	94,47
<b>Private</b>	12	5,53
<b>Total</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 3 shows that half of the respondents are from universities with more than 30.000 students, and one-third from universities between 10 and 30 thousand students.

**Table 3**  
**Size of institution**

Size	Responses	Percentage
<b>Over 30 000 students</b>	110	50,69
<b>10 000 - 30 000 students</b>	73	33,64
<b>Under 10 000 students</b>	34	15,67
<b>Total</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>100</b>

If we consider the current position of the respondents, as in Table 4, the results show that 72.35% of them are academic staff, while the remaining 27.63% are non-academic staff.

**Table 4**  
**Current position**

Please, indicate your current position at your institution	Responses	Percentage
<b>Academic staff</b>	157	72,35
<b>Non-academic staff</b>	60	27,65
<b>Total</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>100</b>

Those that indicated that are academic staff, are mostly “professors, lecturers and other teaching research positions” (68,16%) (see Table 5), 16.78% of which are also “International academic mobility coordinator, international advisor and other positions related to international mobility”. Of the non-academic staff respondents, they are mostly “international relations officers and other similar positions” (52.38%), and 28.57% are “head of the international relations office, exchange coordinator and other direction board positions” (see Table 6).

**Table 5  
Academic staff**

Academic staff (multiple choice, if necessary)	Responses	Percentage
<b>Professor, lecturer and other teaching and research positions</b>	137	68,16
<b>University President/Rector, Faculty Dean, Head of Department and other board of directors positions</b>	21	10,45
<b>International academic mobility coordinator, international advisor and other positions related to international mobility</b>	38	18,91
<b>Other academic personnel</b>	5	2,49
<b>Total</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 6  
Non-academic staff**

Non-academic staff (multiple choice, if necessary)	Responses	Percentage
<b>Head managers, department coordinators and similar staff categories working in areas non-directly devoted to the management of international mobility</b>	7	11,11
<b>Staff working in areas non-directly devoted to the management of international mobility</b>	3	4,76
<b>Head of the international relations officer, exchange coordinator and other direction board positions</b>	18	28,57
<b>International relations officer and other similar positions</b>	33	52,38
<b>Other non-academic personnel</b>	2	3,17
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>100</b>

## 2. Managing the approval of the Learning Agreement (LA)

The most noticeable point about Table 7 is that more than 80% of the total respondents know who is the responsible for approving the LA at their institution.

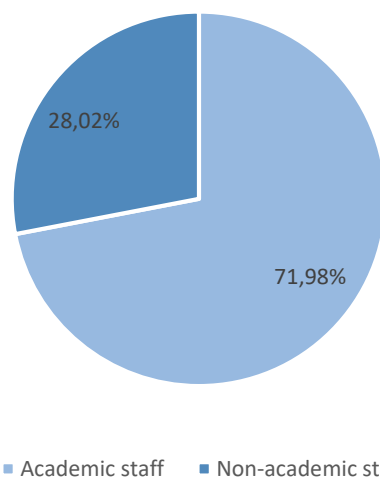
**Table 7  
Learning agreement (LA)**

Do you know who is responsible for approving the Learning Agreement at your university?	Responses	Percentage
<b>Yes</b>	182	83,87
<b>No</b>	35	16,13
<b>Total</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>100</b>

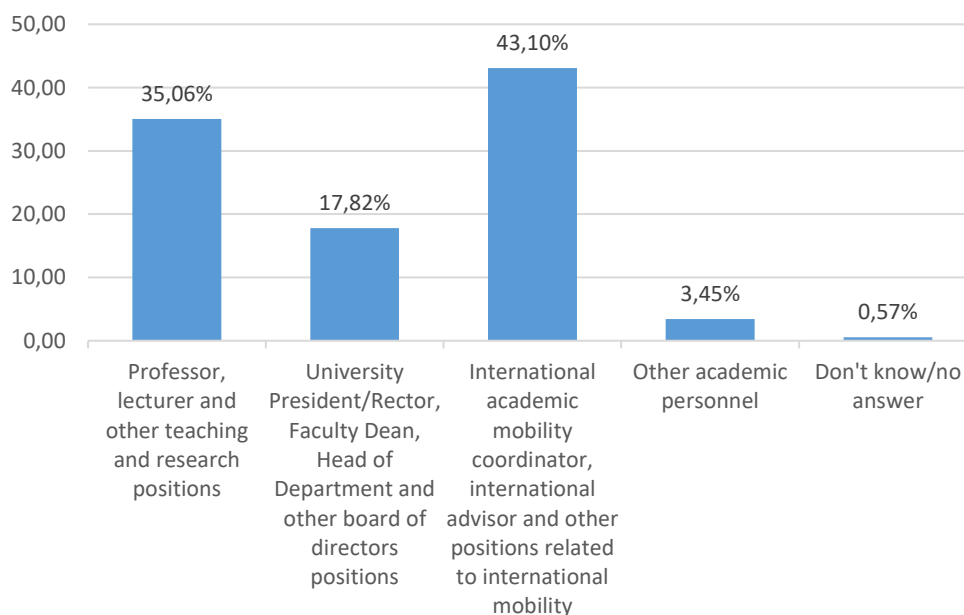
For those that know who is the responsible for approving the LA, it is mostly indicated that the responsible was a member of the academic staff (71,98%)(see Figure 1). More precisely, 43.10% were “international academic mobility coordinator, international advisor and other positions related to international

mobility” (see Figure 2), 33.33% of which were also “professors, lecturers and other teaching and research positions, and 20% of which were also “University President/Rector, Faculty Dean, Head of Department and other board of directors positions”.

**Figure 1**  
**Responsible for approving the LA**



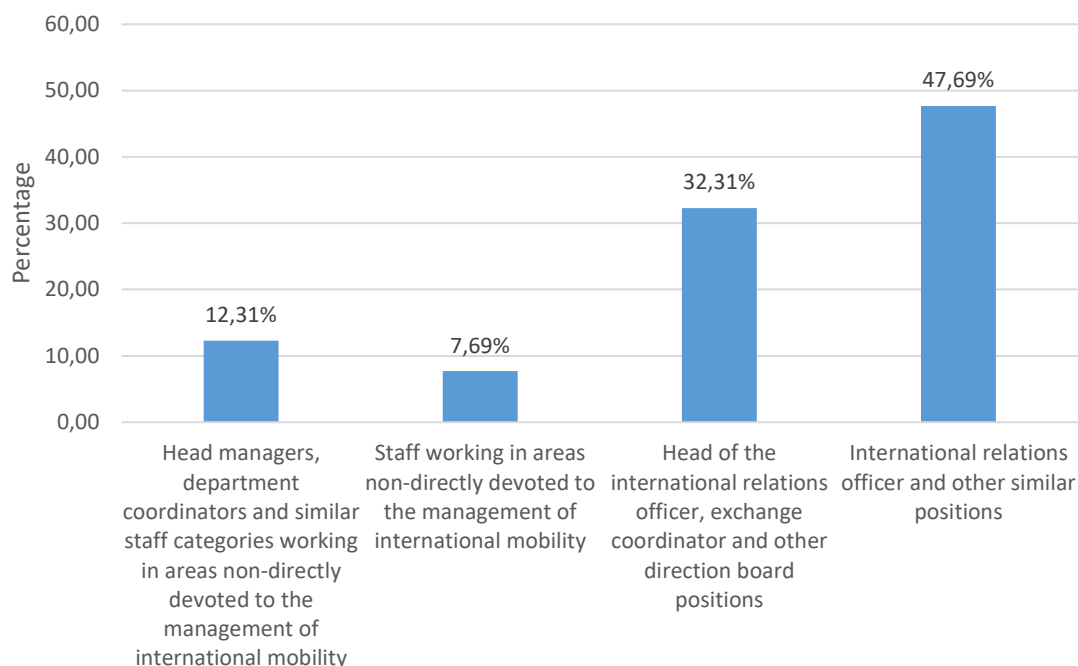
**Figure 2**  
**Academic staff - Responsible for approving the LA**



For those that know who is the responsible for approving the LA, and, in addition, indicated that the responsible was non-academic staff, 47.69% of them specified that the responsibility belonged to an “international relations officer and other similar positions, followed by the “head of the international relations office, the exchange coordinator and other direction boards positions” (see Figure 3).

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**Figure 3**  
**Non-academic staff - Responsible for approving the LA**



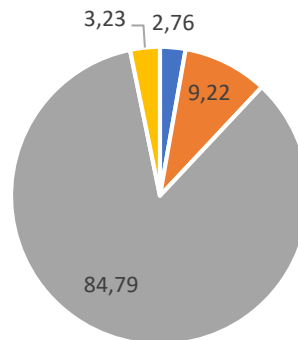
### 3. Mobility patterns and their potential determinants

Not surprisingly, **mandatory mobility is the exception** rather than the rule (see Figure 4). Only 12% of the respondents provided positive answers to Question 9 (Q9: “Is mobility mandatory at your university?”). These answers can be, in turn, divided into two different groups: a small group of respondents stated that mobility was mandatory across all study programmes (2.76%), whereas most of them answered that it was mandatory only for some study programmes (9.22%).

When these latter respondents are asked to specify in what of these programmes mobility is mandatory (Q9.1), they generally refer to the areas of **management, business and international business**. These areas are mentioned by 11 out of the 19 respondents that answered this particular question. Other fields included in the respondents’ answers are **study fields with a language component** as well as area studies (3 out of 19). Interestingly, and perhaps against expectations, **physics, engineering and information technologies** are also said to include compulsory mobility, at least in certain universities.

**Figure 4**

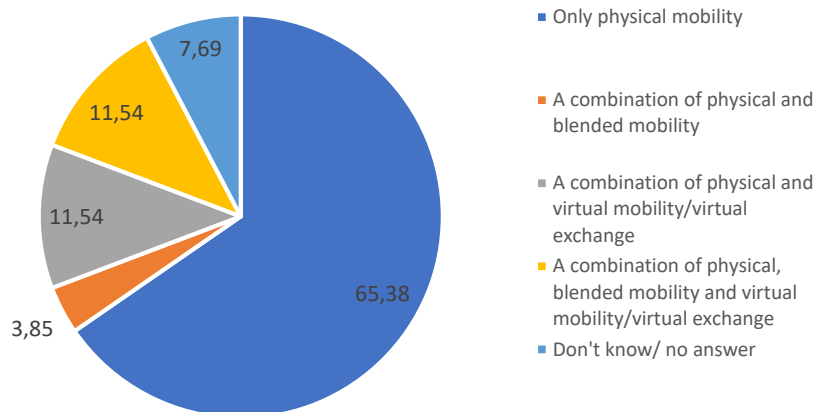
Is mobility mandatory at your university?



- Yes, it is mandatory across all study programmes (please, indicate below the kind of mobility schemes that apply)
- Yes, it is mandatory for some study programmes (please, indicate below the programmes and the kind of mobility schemes that apply)
- No
- Don't know/no answer

**Figure 5**

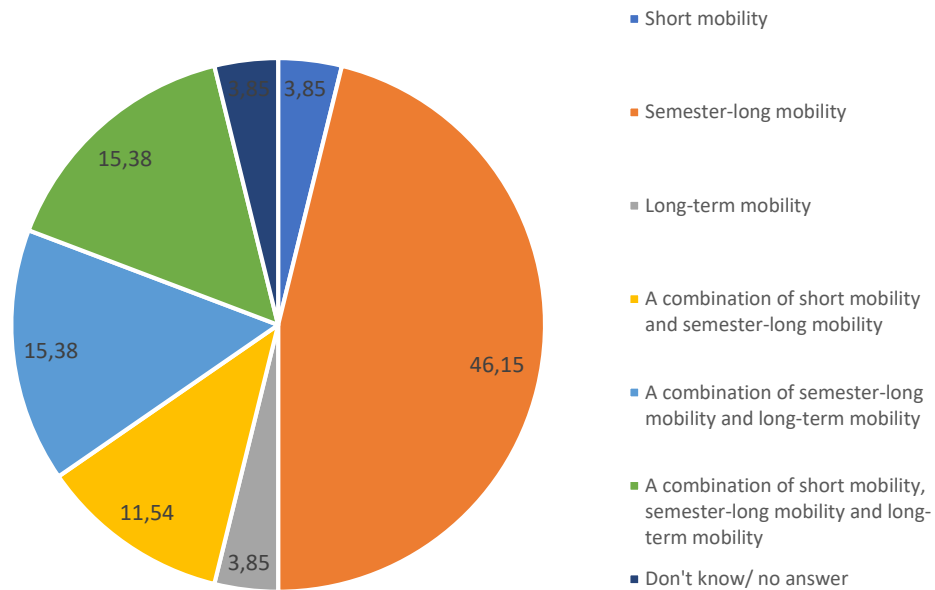
Mobility schemes based on the modality of mobility:





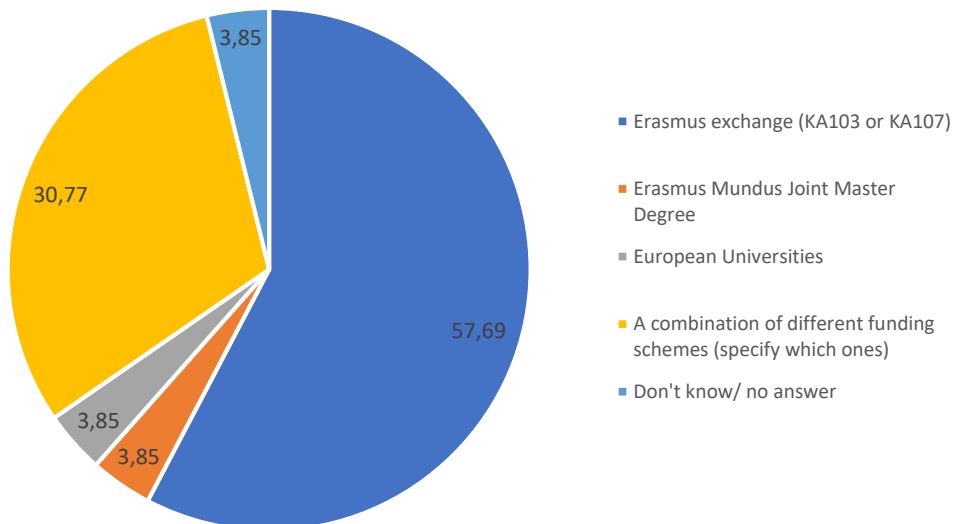
**Figure 6**

Mobility schemes based on the length of the mobility:



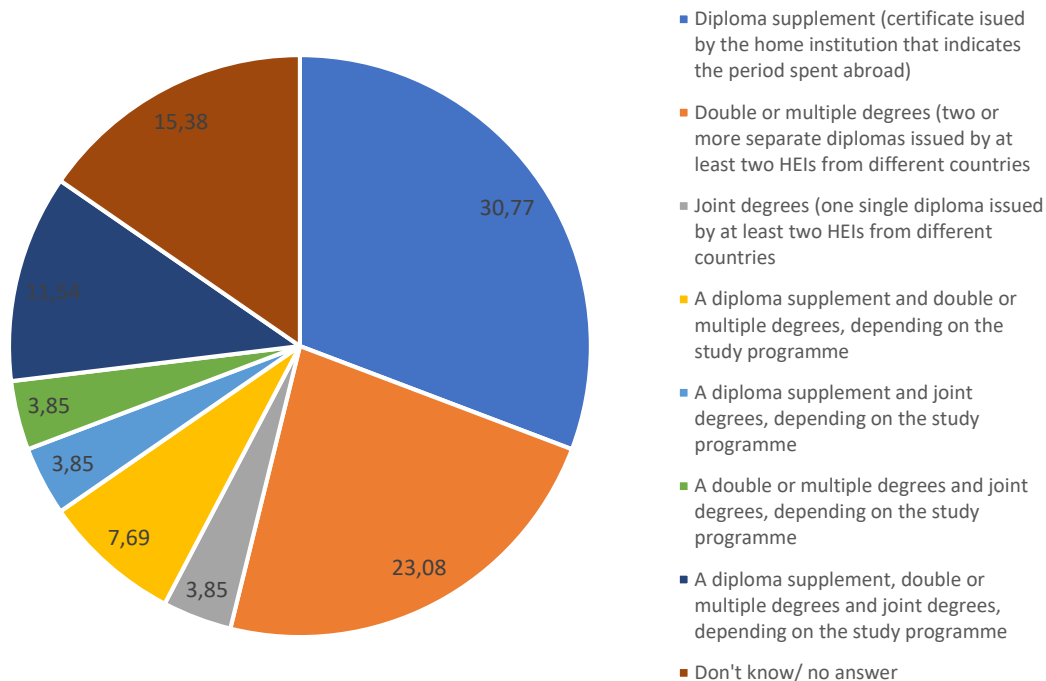
**Figure 7**

Mobility schemes based on the funding scheme:



**Figure 8**

Mobility schemes based on the diploma awarded by the home and/or host higher education institution:



When respondents answer that mobility is mandatory, they are asked to characterize this mobility by providing information on:

a) The modality of mobility (Q9A), which according to two-thirds of the respondents it took place only in the form of **physical mobility**, also in combination with blended (11.54%) and virtual (11.54%) mobility (see Figure 5).

b) The length of the mobility (Q9B), which according to 46.15% of the staff survey respondents it was a **semester-long mobility**. By contrast, long-term and short-term mobilities appear to have been rather uncommon in compulsory mobility (7.7%), but instead they seem rather usual in **combination**, particularly when semester-long mobility is included in this combination (42.3%) (see Figure 6).

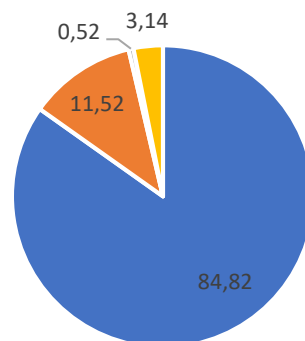
c) The funding scheme (Q9C), which according to 57.69% of the respondents it was financed through **Erasmus (KA 103 or KA 107)**, although a combination of different funding schemes is not uncommon (30,77%) (see Figure 7).

d) The diploma awarded by the home and/or host higher education institution (Q9D), which according to most of the respondents was, in general, either a “**diploma supplement** (certificate issued by the home university that indicates the period spend abroad)” (30.77%) or a “**double or multiple degree** (two or more separate diplomas issued by at least two HEIs from different countries)” (23.08%) (see Figure 8).

Whereas mandatory mobility is the exception rather than the rule, **mobility is, nevertheless, an opportunity that is generally offered to students** (see Figure 9). Of the total respondents to Question 10 (Q10: Does your university offer student mobility opportunities?), a large percentage of them provided a positive answer (more than 95%), although among these answers we found that 11.5% of the respondents (N=22) warned that opportunities to students’ mobility were not promoted in all programmes.

**Figure 9**

Does your university offer student mobility opportunities?



- Yes, in all study programmes (please, indicate below the kind of mobility schemes that apply)
- Yes, but only in some study programmes (please, indicate below the programmes and the kind of mobility schemes that apply)
- No, mobility is not promoted by the university
- Don't know/no answer

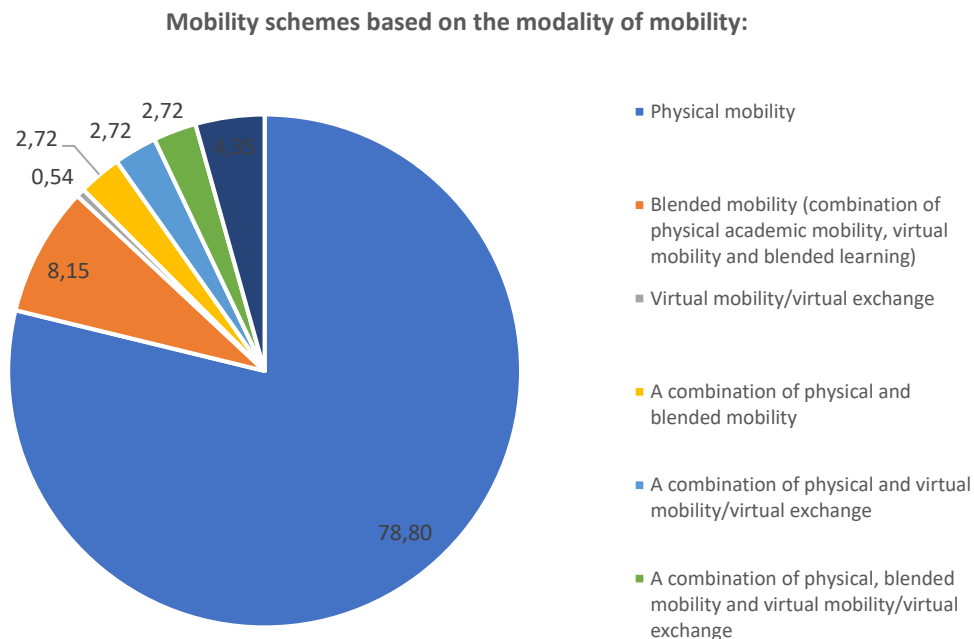
Unfortunately, when we asked for more specific information in open questions (Q10.1 and Q10.2) the answers were unclear. What seems clear is that **there is not a general rule**, but a rather country, and even university specific, pattern. To give an example, some answers from Hungary suggested that mobility restrictions in the areas of Teaching Training, Pedagogy and Psychology, but we know that this is not the case in other countries and universities.

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For those that provided a positive answer to Q10 (i. e. does your university offer student mobility opportunities?), we also asked for the following additional information:

- Mobility schemes based on the modality of mobility (see Figure 10).
- Mobility schemes based on the length of the mobility (see Figure 11).
- Mobility schemes based on the level of integration of mobility into the curriculum (see Figure 12).
- Mobility schemes based on the funding scheme (see Figure 13).
- Mobility schemes based on the diploma awarded by the home and/or host higher education institution (see Figure 14).

**Figure 10**



The conclusions that can be drawn from the answer are far from surprising:

a) Regarding the modality of mobility (Q10A), **physical mobility** prevails (78.8%) although there are 8.15% of respondents that answered that blended mobility was also applied (see Figure 10).

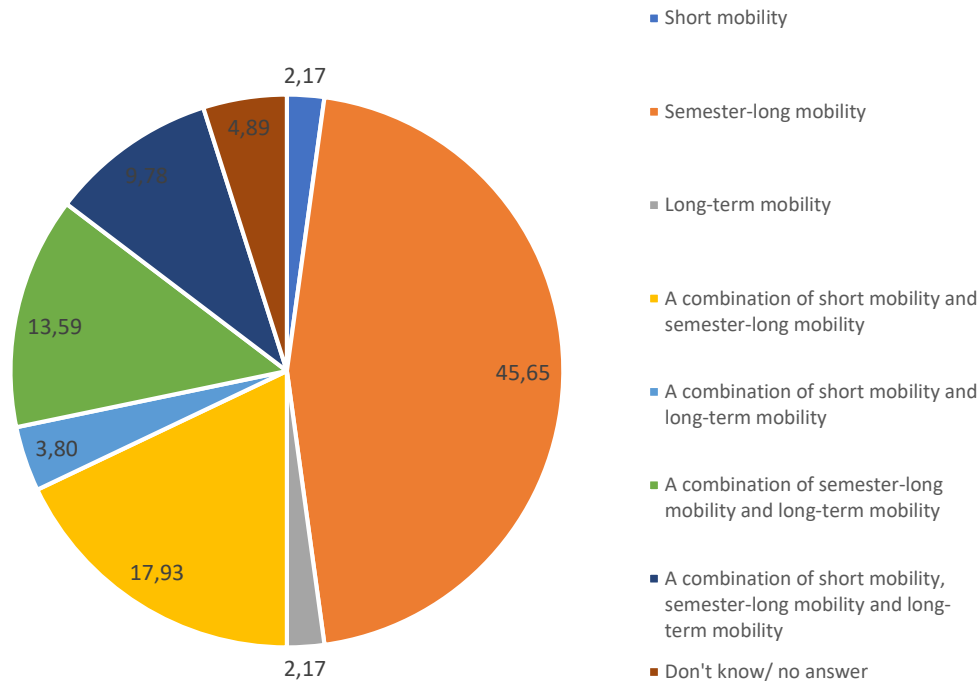
b) As far as the length of the mobility is concerned (Q10B), a large percentage of the mobility is a **semester-long** (45.65%), but **the length of mobility is more flexible**

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than perhaps expected and combinations between short, semester-long and long mobility are also rather important (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11**

Mobility schemes based on the length of the mobility:



c) With respect to the level of integration of mobility into the curriculum (Q10C), there are a non-negligible percentage of respondents that do not answer this question (16.3%). Of the rest, half of the respondents consider that **mobility is embedded or integrated into the curricula**, although not always in an explicit manner as mobility has not been designed (18.48%). Finally, one-third of the respondents believe that mobility is not integrated into the curricula (see Figure 12).

d) As to mobility schemes based on the funding schemes (Q10D), the overwhelming majority of respondents (66.85%) states that mobility relies on an **Erasmus** exchange (KA 103 or KA 107), although a combination of different funding schemes is not uncommon (22,38%) (see Figure 13).

Figure 12

Mobility schemes based on the level of integration of mobility into the curriculum:

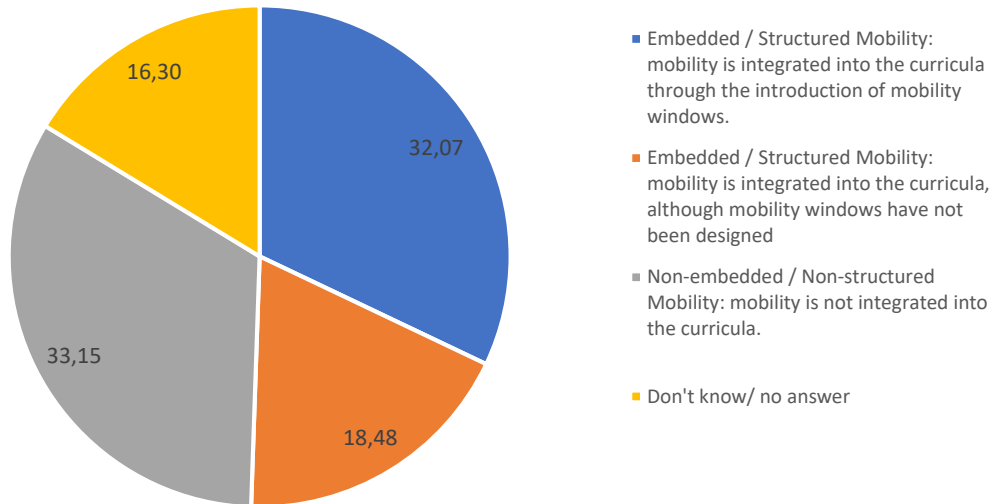
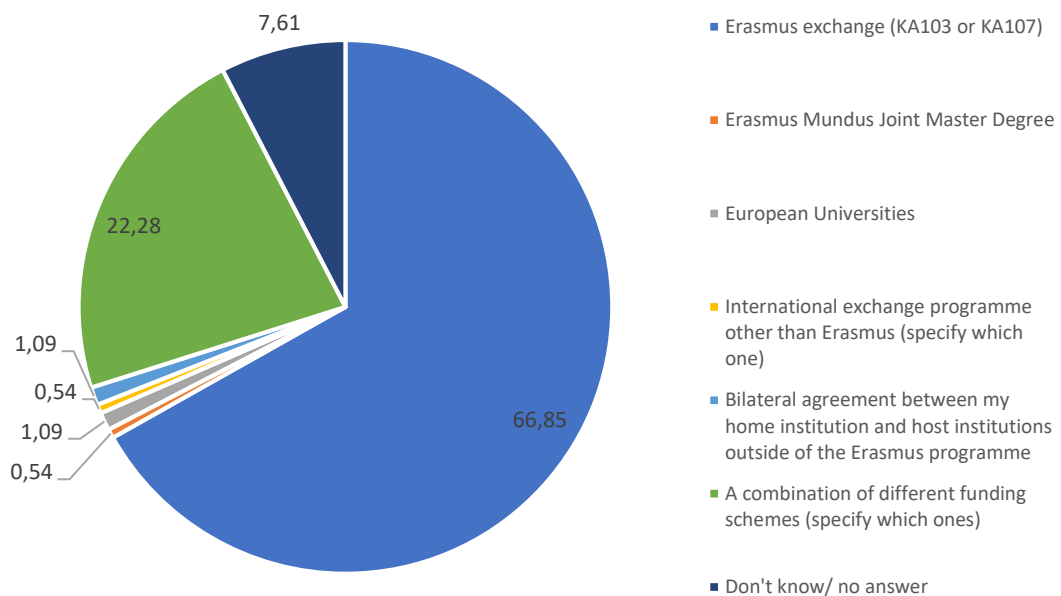


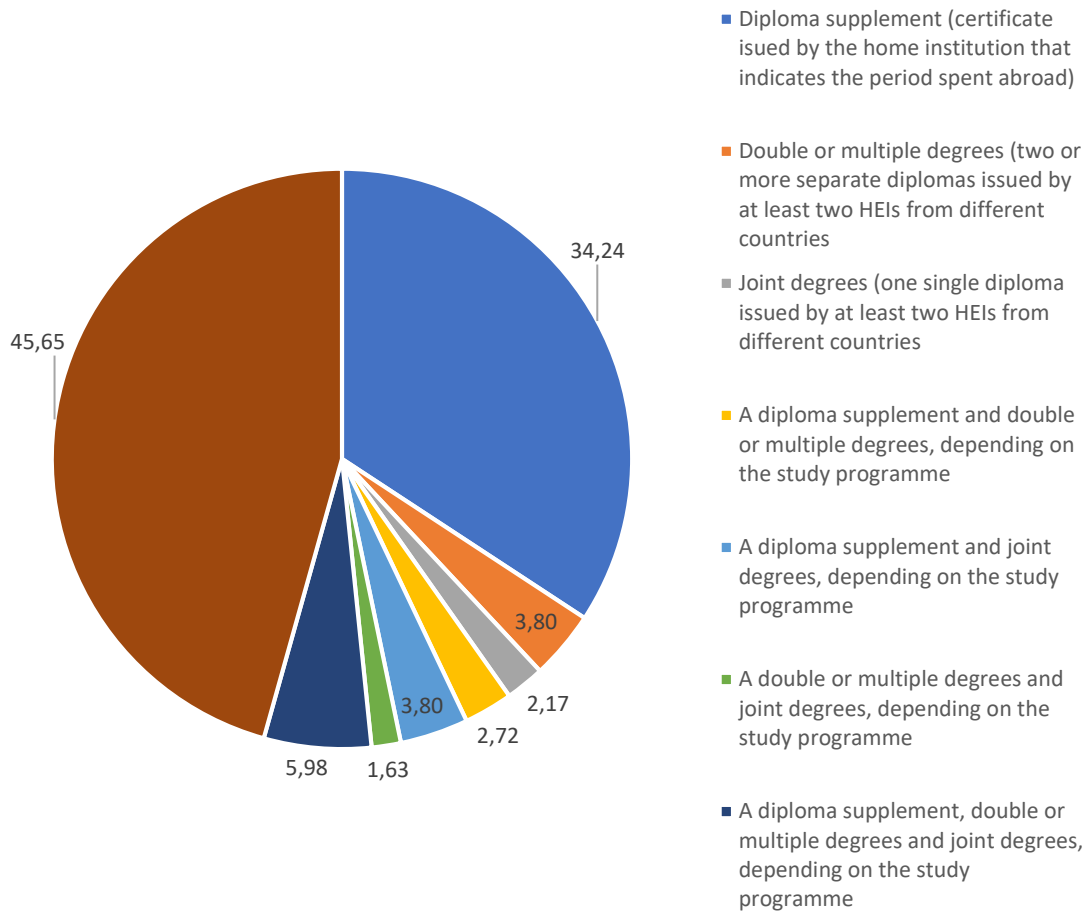
Figure 13

Mobility schemes based on the funding scheme:



**Figure 14**

Mobility schemes based on the diploma awarded by the home and/or host higher education institution:



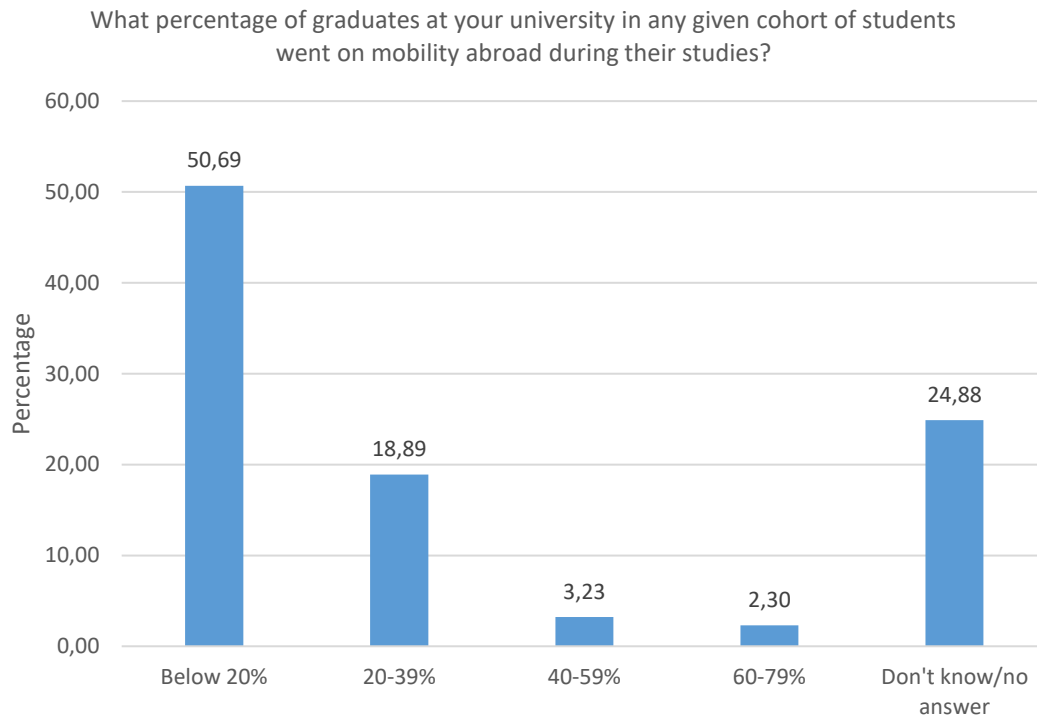
e) Finally and concerning to mobility schemes based on the diploma awarded by the home and/or host higher education institution (Q10E), a large number of respondents (45.65%) **do not or cannot provide an answer**. For those that provide an answer, the option “**diploma supplement** (certificate issued by the home university that indicates the period spend abroad)” is the most selected one (34.24%). The rest of options are very modest (see Figure 14).

Although opportunities for mobility are offered to students, they are not always taken (Q11). According to the majority of respondents to the staff survey (50.7%), **the most likely percentage of mobile students was below 20% of all graduate students**. An additional 18.9% of the survey respondents consider that the percentage of mobile students in their university is between 20 and 39% of all graduate students. There is only a small number of respondents (less than 6%) that

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consider that mobile students account for between 40 and 59% and for 60% or more (see Figure 15).

**Figure 15**



**Table 8**

**Perception of the intensity of mobility**

Category	Below 20%	20-39%	40-59%	60-79%	Don't know/no answer	Total general
<b>Very high</b>	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	100,00	100
<b>High</b>	0,00	14,29	28,57	28,57	28,57	100
<b>Medium</b>	33,33	29,33	4,00	1,33	32,00	100
<b>Low</b>	56,52	21,74	0,00	0,00	21,74	100
<b>Very low</b>	80,70	3,51	0,00	0,00	15,79	100
<b>Total general</b>	<b>50,69</b>	<b>18,89</b>	<b>3,23</b>	<b>2,30</b>	<b>24,88</b>	<b>100</b>

The reasons explaining these low or very low percentages of mobility are various. Before going further, it has to be considered that **perceptions** about how low is low (or how high is high) are **far from homogeneous** (Q12). Indeed, when we ask to respondents to indicate if the rates they provide are, according to their view, very high, high, medium, low, or very low the answers they provide may differ from one respondent to another, as shown in Table 8. For example, most of the respondents (57%) consider that when the rate of mobile students is above 40% rate the intensity of mobility should be qualified as high, but 14,29% of the respondents to

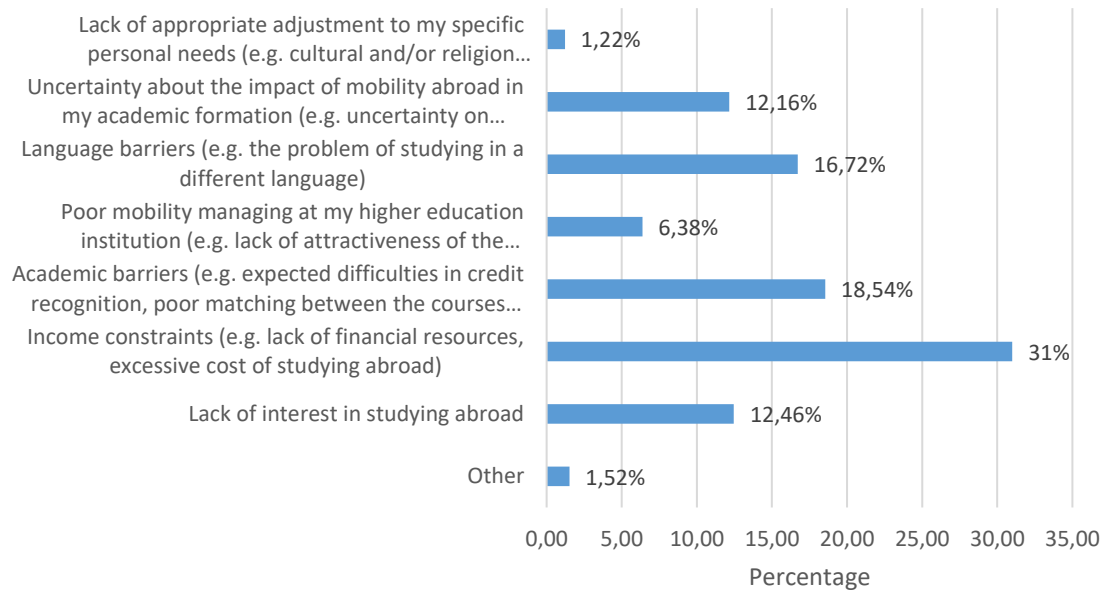


this question believe that lower percentages of students' mobility also fall into this category.

**Figure 16**

**The reasons explaining why mobility rates are considered low or very low**

Please indicate the reasons you believe that might explain why these rates fall into the categories of **low or very low**. Choose maximum 3.



Taken into account this potential shortcoming, the survey asked to the respondents to indicate **the reasons they believe that might explain why the rates they specify falls into the category of low or very low mobility rates** (Q12.1). According to the respondents of the survey, the main reason has to do with **income constraints** (e.g., lack of financial resources, excessive cost of studying abroad) (31%), although academic barriers, together with language issues, are also relevant (see Figure 16). In particular, respondents point out the following:

- **Academic barriers** (e.g. expected difficulties in credit recognition, poor matching between the courses of the host university and my home university subjects, incompatibility of academic calendars) (18.5%).
- **Language barriers** (e.g. the problem of studying in a different language) (16.7%).
- **Uncertainty** about the impact of mobility abroad in students' academic formation (e.g., uncertainty on education abroad and on education system abroad, uncertainty about how mobility might unnecessarily prolong my studies) (12.2%).

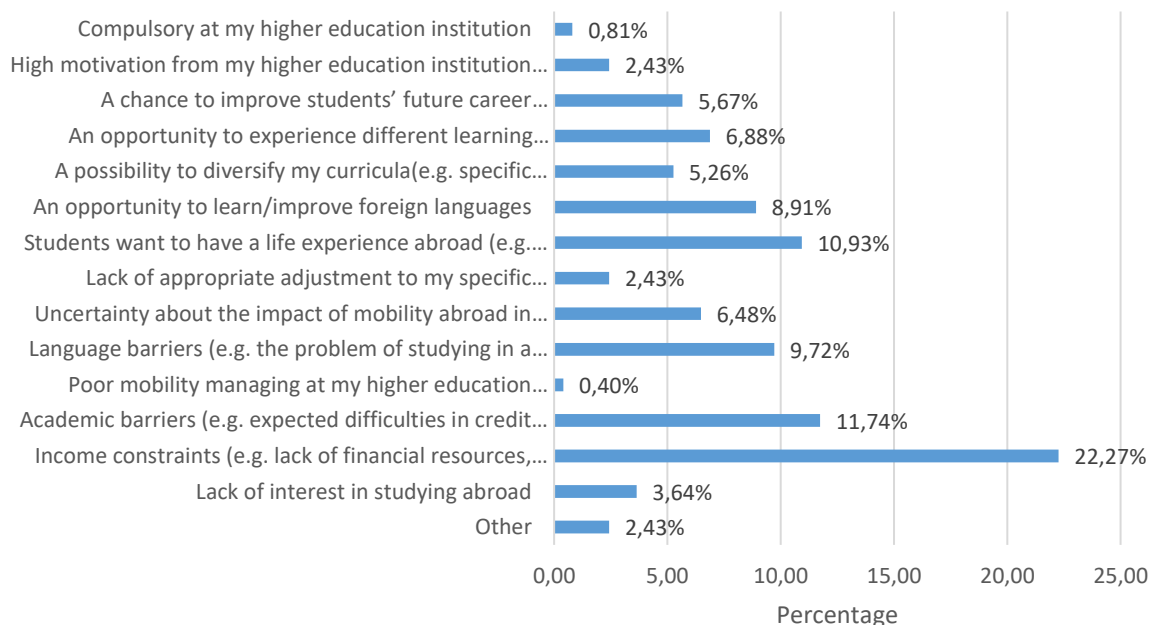
For those respondents who consider that students' mobility rates fall into the **category of medium** (i.e., mobility rates are no high neither low), **income constraints** are the most determinant factor (22.3%), but other factors also play a role (see Figure 17). **On the positive side**, these respondents consider that mobility is mostly promoted by the following factors:

- Students want to have **a life experience abroad** (e.g. intercultural experience, self-enrichment) (10.93%).
- An opportunity to learn/improve **foreign languages** (8.91%).
- An opportunity to experience **different learning practices and teaching methods** (6.88%).

**Figure 17**

**The reasons explaining why mobility rates are considered low or very low**

Please indicate the reasons you believe that might explain why these rates falls into the category of **medium**. Choose maximum 3



On the **negative side**, respondents consider that mobility is mostly hampered by the following factors:

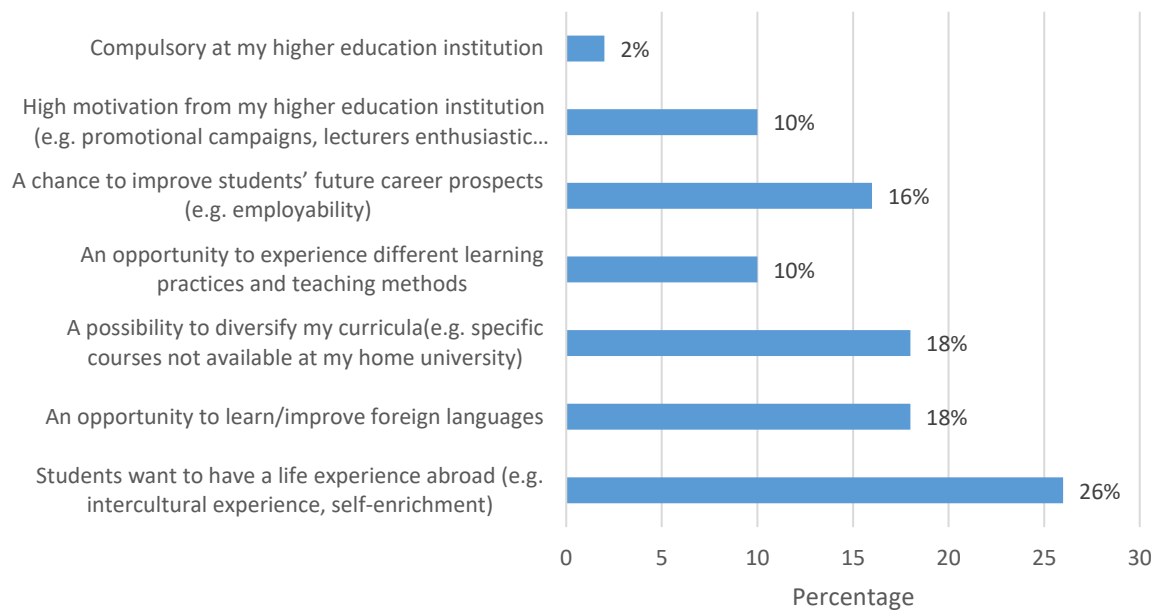
- **Academic barriers** (e.g., expected difficulties in credit recognition, poor matching between the courses of the host university and my home university subjects, incompatibility of academic calendars) (11.74%).
- **Language barriers** (e.g., the problem of studying in a different language) (9.72%).

- **Uncertainty** about the impact of mobility abroad in students' academic formation (e.g., uncertainty on education abroad and on education system abroad, uncertainty about how mobility might unnecessarily prolong my studies) (6.48%).

**Figure 18**

**The reasons explaining why mobility rates are considered high or very high**

Please indicate the reasons you believe that might explain why these rates fall into the categories of **high or very high**. Choose maximum 3



Finally, for those respondents that consider that students' mobility rates fall into the category of **high or very high**, 26% of them consider that the most important reason explaining this successful rate is that **students want to have a life experience abroad** (e.g., intercultural experience, self-enrichment) (26%). Together with this factor, there are other areas that also appear to be relevant in the promotion of high or very high mobility rates (see Figure 18). They are the following:

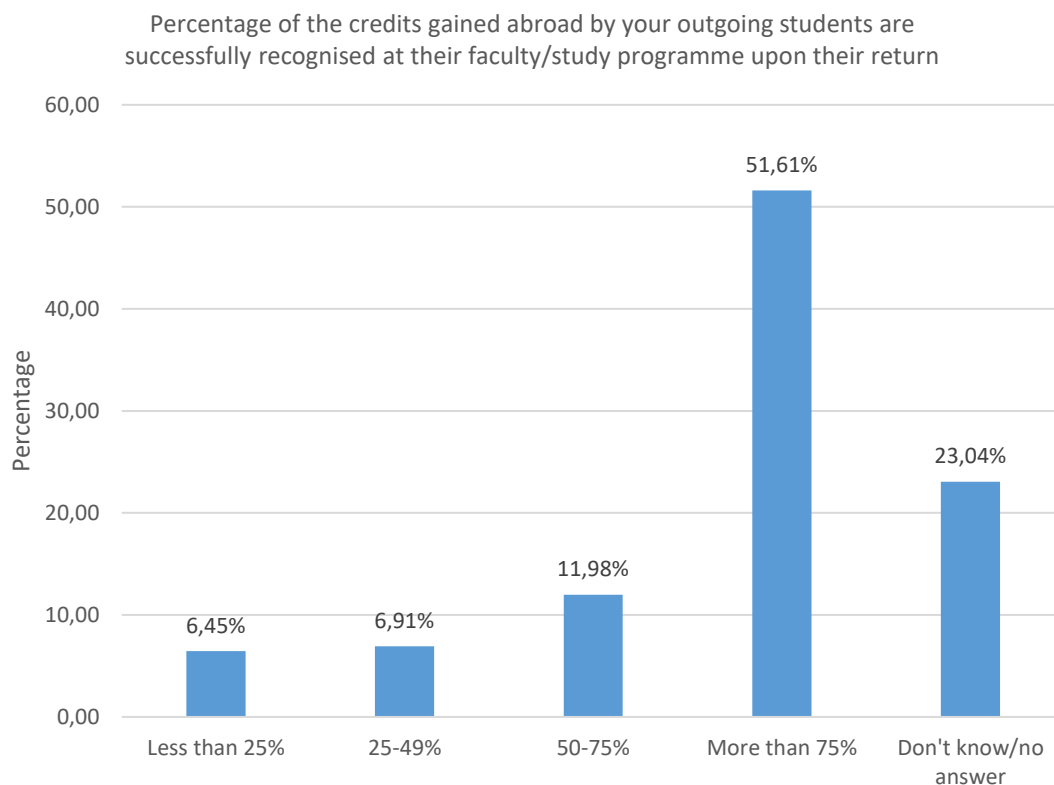
- An opportunity to learn/improve **foreign languages** (18%).
- A possibility to **diversify curricula** (e.g. specific courses not available at my home university) (18%).
- A chance to **improve students' future career prospects** (e.g. employability) (16%).

### 3. The role of credit recognition as a potential academic barrier to student international mobility

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Of the potential academic barriers, credit recognition could be an important potential discouraging factor among those that decided not to be on mobility. Nevertheless, when the issue of credit recognition is specifically asked a large percentage of respondents (almost 52%) answered that **more than 75% of credits were successfully recognised**.

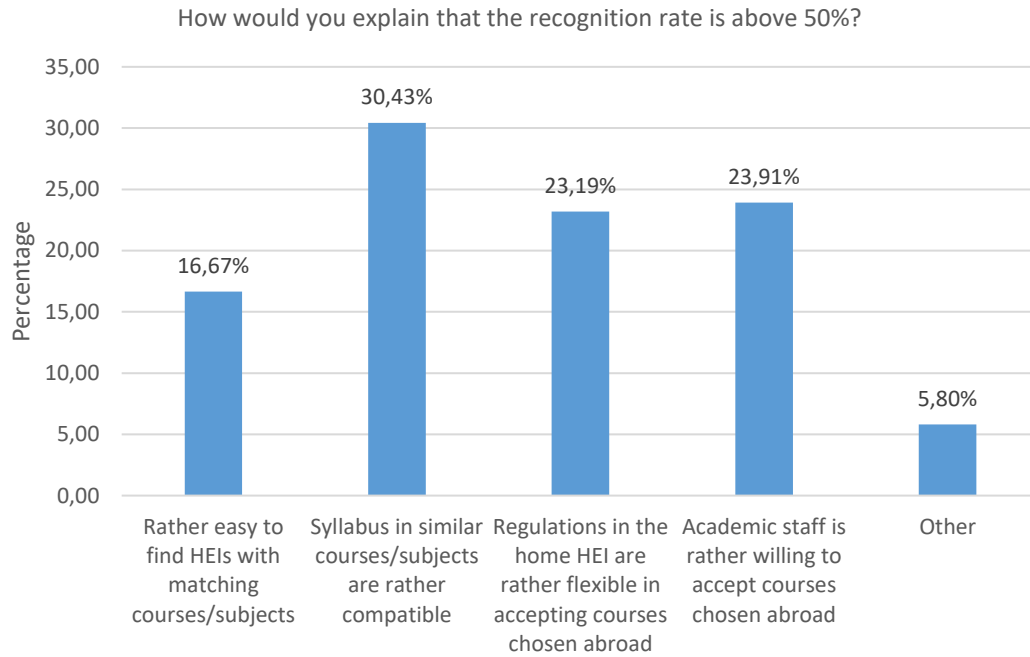
**Figure 16**  
**Credit recognition**



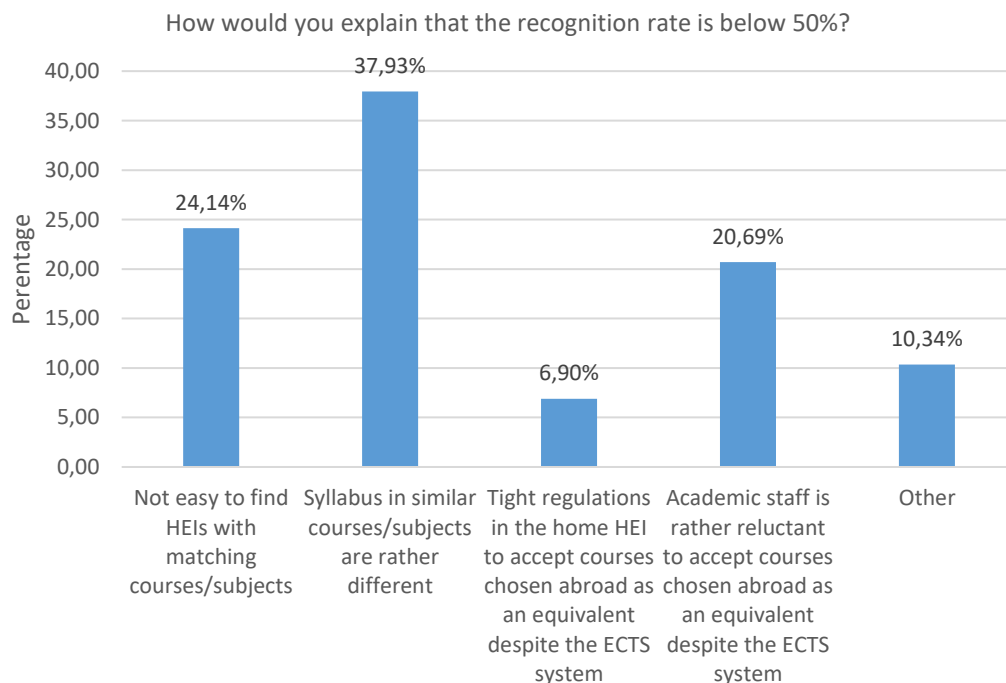
The respondents that state that more than 50% of the credits were recognised (Figure 17) consider that, of the various reasons suggested to explain successful credit recognition, the most relevant ones were the following:

- **Syllabus** in similar courses/subjects were **rather compatible**.
- **Academic staff** were **rather willing to accept courses chosen abroad**.
- **Regulations in the home HEI** were **rather flexible** in accepting courses chosen abroad.

**Figure 17**  
**Explaining successful credit recognition**



**Figure 18**  
**Explaining failed credit recognition**



For those respondents that state that less than 50% of the credits were recognised in the home institution, they consider that that main restrictions in credit recognition are the following:

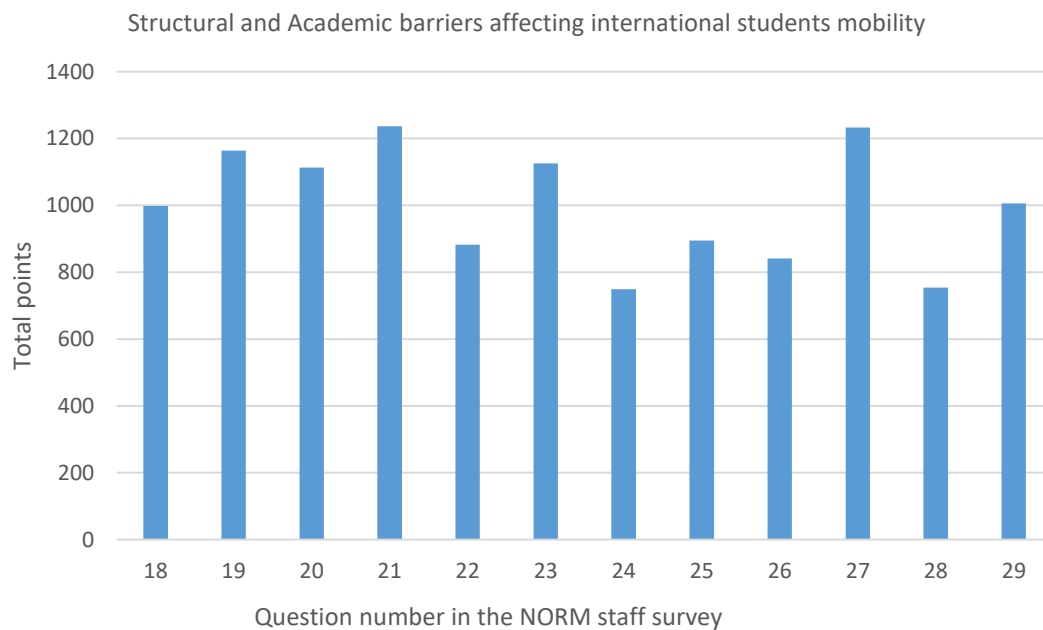
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- **Syllabus** in similar courses/subjects were **rather different**.
- **Not easy to find HEIs with matching courses/subjects**.

#### 4. The most relevant academic and structural barriers to student international mobility

Out of a list of 12 options, the respondents of the NORM survey for staff consider that **the possibility that mobility abroad can prolong studies at the home university (Q27)**, and **the lack of study programs in English at the partner institution (Q21)** are the most relevant academic and structural barriers for international mobility.

**Figure 19**



Legend: Question number: 18. Incompatibility of the academic calendar between the partner institution and my institution; 19. Uncertainty or lack of information on courses and syllabus at the partner institution; 20. Expected difficulties in credit recognition between the partner institution and my institution; 21. Lack of study programs in English at the partner institution; 22. Uncertainty about the quality of the courses and the level of knowledge obtained abroad relative to those provided at my institution; 23. Poor matching between the courses/subjects of the partner institution and those offered by my institution; 24. Lack of support from my institution to help students to prepare their exchange abroad; 25. Complex procedure to apply for mobility; 26. Complexity of the available information on international mobility; 27. Possibility that a mobility abroad could prolong their studies at my institution; 28. Lack of attractiveness of the network of university partners; 29. Lack of incentives from the lecturers of my institution

\*Total points were calculated by multiplying the number of responses obtained per item value (from 0 to 10) by the value indicated by the respondents. We finally add all the scores obtained in each option.

The other three most relevant academic and structural barriers are the following by order of importance:

- **Uncertainty or lack of information on courses and syllabus at the partner institution (Q19).**

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- Poor matching between the courses/subjects of the partner institution and those offered by my institution (Q23).
- Expected difficulties in credit recognition between the partner institution and my institution (Q20).