

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



Covid-19 and Learning Mobility:

A Desk Research Study¹

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December 2020

¹ The authors would like to express their gratitude to the members of the reflection group of Safi Sabuni, Justina Garbauskaite, Alexandra Lopez Severino, Snezana Baclija Knoch and Andreas Karsten for their very useful insights and reflections for this paper, to Lana Pasic from the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership for important insights, and fellow colleagues in the Pool of European Youth Researchers who have also provided guidance and inspiration with their outstanding work.

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this work, commissioned by the European Union-Council of Europe youth partnership, are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of either of the partner institutions, their member states or the organisations co-operating with them.

Executive summary

The Covid-19 pandemic is affecting all aspects of life all around the globe, with societies attempting to deal with the consequences of such a major disruption. On one hand, the health sector is addressing the consequences of the disease in order to save lives, while on the other hand the policy makers and population are focusing on maintaining the education, social and economic life within the scope of sanitary restrictions.

Young people have been particularly affected by the crisis, facing unprecedented levels of uncertainty, anxiety and stress. They are often cut off from their formal and non-formal education opportunities and even deprived of their access to public spaces where they can socialise, learn and have fun. Their private space and autonomy are limited, and, in many countries, their mobility is restricted. This paper examines the impact of the pandemic on young people's learning mobility in both the youth work framework and also international mobility in formal education.

Youth work is offering support and hope to young people in these difficult times. Although the planned youth projects have been either postponed to an undefined date or cancelled altogether in 2020, studies indicate that youth work is resilient and in a constant search for adaptation and survival. However, when studies looking at the situation of youth work and young people are analysed from a learning mobility perspective, the situation appears to be very fragile and is in clear need of support and targeted intervention.

The youth work organisations and youth work community (trainers, youth workers, facilitators, moderators) have been negatively affected by the pandemic: travel and gathering restrictions, lockdowns, curfews, closure of borders, limited access to public spaces have all impacted their projects. The limitations and reallocation of available funds as well as the inability to do self-financing and fundraising activities have had a major impact on youth work. Studies indicate serious shortage and difficulties in financing administrative and everyday activities, which in return result in cuts in projects, activities and staff costs. The negative consequences faced by youth work will unavoidably be reflected in learning mobility: there will be fewer organisations and staff and fewer opportunities for mobility projects. Youth organisations which are inactive for a certain time period also face the risk of loss of social capital and networks.

Youth workers are also facing major difficulties. Economic difficulties as a result of loss of income or loss of employment are very common. Furthermore, the youth work community needs time, support and guidance to deal with the consequences of the pandemic and the changes in youth work. Going online through virtual exchanges, for instance, requires youth workers to learn new skills and build their digital competences in order to prepare themselves for working within the new environment.

The impact on international student mobility was abrupt and students in mobility – both within higher education institutions (HEI) and in other forms of mobility such as internships, trainings, projects or voluntary work – were faced with “closure” of universities with distance learning becoming a substitute for face-to-face education.

While for students in the first wave of the pandemic the mobility halt came as a shock, those who went to study abroad, participate in projects, or do internships in the second part of the year had a chance to consider the probability of a second wave of the pandemic. Lockdown measures put in place in March 2020 were extremely stressful for students and universities.

Moving education online had both positive and negative consequences for students, particularly regarding the impact of social isolation on their mental well-being. The impact on EU and non-EU students was not even. About half of students decided to return to their home countries, but still, many were deprived of such a possibility, particularly non-EU students.

The studies conducted so far indicate that students tend to postpone their mobility plans, although there is a growing consideration for virtual mobility as an alternative. The situation has also brought forward the need for higher education institutions (HEI) to develop contingency plans for mobility in crisis situation.

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to affect young people’s lives and youth and education sectors, we are left to examine and rethink the implications not only for the present and future of youth work and learning mobility, but also for young people’s development, identity, intercultural learning, diversity and inclusion, mental health and well-being and economic stability in the context of mobility programmes.

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Introduction

The aim of the study is to look at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on learning mobility with its consequences for young people, their development, well-being and learning.

The European Platform on Learning Mobility (EPLM) defines learning mobility as “transnational mobility undertaken for a period of time, consciously organised for educational purposes or to acquire new competences or knowledge. It covers a wide variety of projects and activities and can be implemented in formal or non-formal settings.” In this study we looked specifically at learning mobility that occurs within youth work settings and is strongly related to non-formal learning; and within formal education, mostly higher education institutions, where learning mobility implies both participation in formal education but with non-formal and informal learning experiences accompanying university participation.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO 2020), Europe has moved from a continent of intensive mobility to one that introduced border closures and additional restrictions in relation to geographical movement, for example a ban on travelling between regions or a ban on using hotels and rented accommodation. What was once a strong characteristic of the European way of life, the ability to travel around the continent for different purposes such as education, work, or family reasons, started to be described as an epidemiological threat. The transnational ideal was put into question and in many cases the lives of those who live across borders or who are super-mobile (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska 2021) became unwelcome or impossible, revealing the fragility of their status and vulnerability in a crisis situation. Similarly, the mobility structures proved unprepared for this situation – with the crisis often being patched by engaged teachers and administrators and human empathy. In most cases, rushed but premature attempts to simply transfer everything into online platforms were observed without much consideration or preparation. Unfortunately, almost one year later, as of December 2020 the restrictions and limitations in regard to mobility were reinstated and the numbers of people infected and deceased were on the rise once again.

Young people were deeply affected by the pandemic and the policies that were introduced to deal with it (e.g. teenagers’ restriction of movement without a guardian or in some countries strict lockdowns targeted at young people). All aspects of their lives, from education to socialisation, from economy to their future aspirations were radically altered by the restrictions, limitations and changes. Numerous young people all around the world had to deal with the loss of their loved ones, worried about their families and friends and had to face a serious amount of stress about the disease and getting sick. However, not being in the group with the highest risk in relation to COVID-19, young people are also faced with anxieties, unknowns and concerns relating to other spheres of life and their future. They are most probably facing such a large scale of uncertainty at society level for the first time in their lives. They are surrounded by economic

crisis and loss of income, increasing youth unemployment and decreasing opportunities in education, professional life and social interactions. Most of them are cut off from their social circles, which is crucial in personal development and due to restrictions they are confined with their families, which affects their personal and private space. These developments particularly affect disadvantaged youth for whom home might not constitute the safe space for development and learning, or not provide adequate technical conditions to do so.

The EU-Council of Europe youth partnership has been collecting and sharing a series of extensive research on Covid-19 and youth through its [Knowledge Hub](#). In this hub, a series of desk studies and reviews are available, including the briefing focusing on different aspects of the impact of the pandemic on youth. [Briefing 1: An Introduction to Research on the Impact of Covid-19 on the Youth Sector](#) by Lavizzari et al. gathers a significant body of studies, analyses, surveys and policy documents on Covid-19 and summarises their main findings, finishing with a list of further issues that need to be investigated. The briefing provides an overview of the key studies on the impact of Covid-19 and education and learning mobility; youth employment; youth work and youth organisations; and young people's mental health and well-being. While some consequences for learning mobility in this briefing were indicated, this report will go further to gain a deeper insight in developments in this regard – also reflecting on possible implications of the research findings.

The research reveals that the youth feel a higher level of uncertainty about the future – of the pandemic, society, and their personal educational or professional future (Shanahan et al. 2020). While studying at home, many not only being under a lockdown but also in isolation or quarantine, students were (on the global level) “most of the time” or “all of the time” worrying about their professional career in the future and study issues, e.g. lectures, seminars, practical work (Aristovnik et al. 2020). Importantly, these worries on one hand relate to the current life conditions – health risk, job loss, financial struggles, loss of social contacts – but also perspectives of the future. The studies on geographical mobility of students, even if still not accessible to all young people, indicate that a stay abroad constitutes an exceptional and unique space for young people for their self-development, realisation of their potential and time of future redirection (e.g. Krzaklewska 2013, Cairns et al. 2018, Cuzzocrea et al. 2021). Even imagining mobility may be seen as an expression of one's agency – one's vision of future possibilities (Cuzzocrea, Mandich 2015). So next to skills and competences gathered abroad, mobility as a social zone is a unique tool for becoming the person one dreams of being. What happens if this change is taken away from young people? What are the implications of shrinking mobility opportunities and restriction of movement? We will discuss those in the final part of this report.

Researching the impact of Covid-19 on youth mobility: emerging research themes, methods and targets

The overview of the extensive amount of all available studies, research and surveys on Covid-19 and youth is beyond the scope and capacity of this study. Only those that provide an implication for and provide evidence for reflecting on learning mobility are included. Considering the vast amount of available studies and surveys, and the pace at which they are being delivered, it is very probable that this study overlooked some research. This is by no means an indication of assessment of quality or an issue of evaluation. It is simply a reflection of time and space limitations.

Our desk research indicates that the limited resources in relation to youth mobility and pandemic impact on mobility are very much correlated. The initial wave of research was significant even if introduced in an emergency. Studies focused on a description of the crisis momentum with its immediate effects on youth, youth work, youth mobility or formal education. With lockdowns being introduced and institutions closed, many institutions ran online surveys to capture the situation and gather the opinions of both mobility participants, as well as institutions (precisely, through their representatives). While we witnessed studies of the European Commission, EAIE, IUA, ESN and many others, there were some singular initiatives of researchers e.g. from Poland or Portugal (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska, Mobedadze 2021; Cairns et al. 2020) who undertook initiatives to gather qualitative data during this important moment in mobility history. Some institutions produced expertise or position papers in relation to the potential impact on pandemic or crisis management (e.g. UNESCO, IUA with ESN).

Although the pandemic limited physical mobility to a very large extent, through the use of digital and online technologies, the researchers were able to go beyond the local level and conduct studies at regional, national and international levels.

In terms of methodology, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used with a clear dominance of online surveys as a method with their fast outcomes and the possibility to gather opinions transnationally from a large sample of respondents. Due to the urgent nature of the issue, particularly for the research carried out in the early months of the lockdowns, namely spring and summer 2020, accidental sampling and purposive/judgmental sampling techniques were employed, i.e. sending out questionnaires to mailing lists, posting links to social media etc. Access to information was valued over rigorous scientific sampling techniques.

However, with the passage of time, there are examples of clearer and better designed sampling strategies, increasing the representativeness of the studies. At the same time, in what is rather a worrying trend, it appears that the level of interest has declined and that few follow-up studies are being conducted. There is a concern that the limited number of studies being conducted in

the second half of 2020 will leave us with a limited knowledge regarding the long-term effects of the pandemic. On the positive side, the deeper data analysis and meta-analysis of the initial studies are being conducted in the second half of 2020, such as the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership briefing series and the RAY-COR project. As the informal field review indicates, studies are in development, but publications are yet not out.

Main research findings

Covid-19 and mobility activities within youth work framework

In this section, we focus on research that studies the impact of the pandemic on mobility undertaken within youth work in Europe. The focus of analysis is on possible implications of these findings on the field of learning mobility, which are discussed in detail in the final section. The findings indicate that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on youth work and as a consequence on the learning mobility opportunities that youth work provides and supports.

General impact on youth work: Projects and activities

The first study reviewed was done by the Research-based Analysis of European Youth Programmes (RAY) network in June 2020. The RAY research network is one of the biggest in Europe, composed of 36 RAY partners in 34 countries, which are all national agencies in charge of the European Youth programmes. This research, titled: *RAY-COR: The impact of the corona pandemic on youth work in Europe*, offers quantitative data from online surveys conducted within RAY Network member states. It has an impressive 1 718 responses, 938 full responses composed of 560 youth workers and youth leaders and 378 young people involved in youth work. The RAY-COR was conducted rather early, in June 2020, at the beginning of summer, when many youth projects were cancelled. Therefore, when the results are analysed, the time factor should be taken into consideration as it does describe the early impact on youth workers and young people involved in youth work and does not provide information and analysis on the prolonged impacts and the direction of change. It should be noted, however, that this is an ongoing research project and it will update its findings regularly in the coming months based on the findings from new waves of surveys and through collection of qualitative data. Therefore, RAY-COR will be able to provide data to make comparisons over time. In this desk study, the findings of the first wave results (RAY-COR [Initial Survey Findings](#) Data Snapshot 1) are utilised.

According to the survey data, **70% of responding youth workers and youth leaders stated that the coronavirus pandemic has affected their own youth work majorly**. For 23%, the pandemic affected their youth work moderately, with only just below 1% stating the pandemic has had no effects at all on their youth work. In terms of young people accessing youth work related activities, in June 2020 a little over half of the responding young people stated that their access

to youth activities or projects was affected majorly. And one out of four respondents stated that the pandemic affected their youth work access moderately.

The prospects of activities being postponed and cancelled were well visible by June 2020. **More than half of the organisations (54%) reported that two thirds or more of their ongoing work was delayed or interrupted.** And from the perspective of the youth workers, 40% of all responding youth workers see more than half of their current youth work activities at risk of being cancelled entirely, which indicates a major loss of income and future engagements.

Another important and informative study at the European level is the "[Effects of Covid-19 across youth work and youth activities](#)", which is based on the survey launched by the CMJ working group on responses to Covid-19. The data of this study was collected with an online survey distributed to major youth networks, with a field work date from 1 July to 1 August 2020. The respondents were 48 youth organisations across Council of Europe member states: 18 youth organisations stated they are local NGOs; 14 were international networks or organisations; 10 were nationally based and six regional.

In terms of activities, the CMJ working group study found out that the majority of youth organisations had to cancel all their planned activities for 2020/21. **This was particularly true for the learning mobility projects: most of the projects were cancelled for external and internal reasons.** External factors refer to travel restrictions, curfews and lockdowns, which are rather expected. However, the internal factors are also crucial: many organisations stated that they had difficulties in mobilising and motivating their volunteers, staff and even board members to participate, contribute, design and implement mobility projects. The same study also indicates that such limitations and decrease in participation are also valid for volunteering projects.

European Solidarity Corps volunteering projects were also affected severely, with most of them being cancelled and the volunteers returning home. The [Solidarity study](#) conducted by the Polish National Agency of Erasmus+ Programme and European Solidarity Corps (FRSE) offer valuable insights at national level. According to this study's findings, based on 95 Solidarity Corps volunteers who remained in Poland, the feeling of solidarity among the volunteers was very high and 63% of the volunteers stated that they remained to finish their project although they had the opportunity to return to their homes. However, **their solidarity projects have changed very significantly due to the pandemic (65.5%) or changed to some extent (33.3%),** and only a mere 1% of the volunteers stated that their projects remained the same. Thus, the pandemic has changed the ongoing European Solidarity projects and the effects of such changes on the volunteers, the hosting organisation and the project has to be studied as a major factor. These changes in the project were both internal and external. Internal changes were twofold: first, as to be expected, the activities became online rather than face to face; more writing activities (blogs, social media, websites etc.) took place. Second, there were pandemic-related activities,

such as sewing masks or packing and distributing food for those in need. External dimension changes were related to the experiences and practices of the volunteers; they became more isolated on one hand, doing more sports, yoga and meditation, but on the other hand, as borders were closed, the volunteers travelled extensively within Poland. The study also offers an important finding: one out of five volunteers indicate that their perception of solidarity changed and expanded as a result of this experience.

Different aspects of youth work: Space, tools, methods and values

RAY-COR research's first findings demonstrate that just as different and numerous aspects of everyday life are affected by the pandemic and related policy measures and developments, different aspects and fields of youth work are also negatively affected. **The spatial dimension, as expected, is the one field that the respondents point out to be affected (youth work spaces: 69%),** followed by youth work methods (52%), youth work timing (47%) and youth work tools (46%). However, it is very important to take note of one dimension of youth work that has not changed due to the pandemic: the values. Close to half (48%) of the responding youth workers state that their youth work values have not changed at all, while 28% state that their values changed only slightly. Only one out of 10 youth workers stated a major change in their youth work values.

In line with the findings of RAY-COR, the spatial dimension of youth work is severely affected in a negative way, as the findings of the EKCYC questionnaire by the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership demonstrate. The requirements of social distancing during the lockdown severely impacted on youth sector programmes and activities and also reflected the importance of the physical environment and face-to-face contact in the sector. According to the study, many youth NGOs could not reach the young persons they are working with face to face. Cultural activities as well as physical activities were suspended. Projects had to be postponed or suspended. Summer camps were cancelled in many countries and in other cases these activities had to be reorganised. Registration of names for contact tracing was mentioned as a challenge (Donovan and Zentner 2020).

Funding and everyday operation of youth organisations

The reviewed research reveals a striking dimension: youth work practice was in dire straits and struggling to continue its everyday operation both through financial and physical restrictions and also through diminishing voluntarism and the added value generated through volunteer contributions. According to the RAY-COR survey, **74% of organisations participating in the survey had to close their office temporarily,** and 20% say it is likely they will have to do so still. Budgets have been impacted severely, staff time has been cut, and volunteering decreased according to the findings of the first wave of the survey in June 2020. **38% of organisations reported a**

reduction in work time of paid staff members, and 12% had to let staff members go. 25% of organisations were expecting that further work time reductions will be necessary, and 11% expected additional job cuts. The cancellations of planned activities and projects had a major impact on the budgets as well. Almost half of the respondent youth organisations (49%) reported a decrease in their budget at the time of the survey, and more worryingly, for half of these organisations, the budget shrank by 40% or more. 63% of respondents say that some volunteers suspended their engagement temporarily, and 26% say that some of their volunteers have resigned permanently.

The CMJ study also investigated the impact on the funding and functioning of youth organisations. The findings reveal that before the pandemic, most of the organisations were mainly financed through local, national and international calls for projects, fee-based programmes, private funds from companies or through annual governmental granting activities. However, with the pandemic, most of these grants were delayed or cancelled, private donations switched to the medical field, some of the members were not able to pay the fees for the programmes, online activities were not granted the same support as offline ones, local calls for projects – especially those organised by local governments or by local authorities – were either cancelled or postponed. And in some cases, organisations that received funds for projects and activities that were not realised in 2020, but were postponed to 2021, were asked to return the funds, putting a very heavy burden on the organisations. Contrary to the general assumption, going online did not necessarily make activities cheaper or cost-free. Many organisations and youth workers, the study shows, were not fully prepared and trained for online youth work, and had to make major investments in equipment, software, infrastructure and training. Furthermore, even the simplest everyday activity costs have significantly increased due to the obligations and necessities of taking required sanitation and hygiene precautions, the findings of the study reveal.

The European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCY) also launched a questionnaire [Towards a better understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on the youth sector](#), through data collection with a European-level survey via its correspondents (Donovan and Zentner 2020). As of October 2020, there were responses from 24 countries. An important finding is related to the funding of the youth work and the support given to them through public funds. **The study reveals that for most countries the impact on public funding was either neutral, strong or very strong.** The study presents evidence that funding is being increased, or directed towards alternative channels, e.g. digitalisation. There is also some evidence of funding being redirected to other sectors and that municipalities, local projects and initiatives and calls for projects are more adversely affected.

Similarly to other studies, the findings from the EKCY questionnaire by the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership highlights the economic difficulties faced by the youth organisations and youth

workers. The study shows that **in countries that depend largely on NGO and European or irregular funding, youth workers have seen reduced hours, changes in working conditions (working mainly from home), adoption of new practices – digitalisation – and job insecurity.** The findings of the EKCYP questionnaire by the youth partnership also highlight the economic crisis, in particular the issue of youth unemployment. According to the survey, youth was hit very hard by the economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis. Youth at risk, often less educated or with a migrant background, who were already in a disadvantaged situation before the pandemic, witnessed their economic situations worsening. Donovan and Zentner (2020) foresee that the health and sanitary emergency will be followed by an economic crisis, particularly when it comes to the economic situation of young people.

Youth work goes online: Curse and blessing

While the pandemic continues to place restrictions on the youth sector, RAY-COR provides evidence that youth work is resilient, and fast to adapt and experiment. This is most clear in the use of online technologies and digitalisation of youth work. At the time of the survey, **17% of respondents said that all of their youth work has been transferred online already;** and 35% stated that one-third of their work had switched to online, 19% reported that two-thirds or more of their youth work had transferred online and only 7% reported that none of their work was online at the time.

Digitalisation and going online is important; however, RAY-COR findings also point out the possible exclusion dimension of such a switch due to the pandemic. The first and most striking finding is the digital divide. In many countries, young people from a diversity of disadvantaged backgrounds do not have access to smartphone, a tablet, or a computer that is reliably connected to a reasonably fast and steady internet connection. RAY-COR data shows that many of the young people share devices in their households; and too many don't have any. As a result, they struggle to participate in online formats of formal education, and lack sufficient digital resources for online youth work as well. This results in young people dropping out of youth work activities. **70% of responding youth workers say they have lost access to more than one third of the young people they normally work with.** For 37%, it is more than two thirds. Digitalisation and online youth work is posing a new form of exclusion for young people with disabilities, RAY-COR finds. The lack of support for young people with disabilities appears as a source of disappointment and RAY-COR data points out that many of the platforms in use are not WCAG-standard-compliant, and too much of the technology in use is not either. Young people with disabilities therefore often struggle to join online activities in formal as much as non-formal education.



Illustration by Zilvinas Mazeikis, from Connecting the dots: young people, social inclusion and digitalisation, Tallinn, 26-28 June 2018

Digitalisation and going online was not a perfect remedy either, and the findings from the EKCYP questionnaire by the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership present different examples where there was a lack of capacity, resources and training in some countries as well as an urban/rural divide in some instances.

Although not directly linked with youth work as such, the survey findings by the European Commission looking at the mobility field under the Erasmus+ programme, titled [Coronavirus: learning mobilities impact survey results](#), also provide valuable insights. The study is based on the findings of the May 2020 survey sent to 57 000 participants (of which 11 800 responded) representing all types of mobility supported under the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes. The survey was run to collect the views of mobility participants on how the Covid-19 outbreak affected the ordinary course of their mobility activities.

An important finding is that one out of four people who were part of mobility projects continued to function and stayed in the destination locations, while **75% of the affected participants returned home**. Most of those were participants of the European Solidarity Corps, (more than 50% of them stayed abroad), while only 10% of the VET and school education participants stayed abroad.

The European Commission survey has an important finding regarding the future of mobility: **a majority of the young people would prefer the physical experience, but if the Covid-19 pandemic continues, they may be willing to try other alternatives to mobility, with only 9%**

stating that if the pandemic ensues, they would cancel their mobility. In terms of best alternative options, as an advice to the future, based on their own experiences, **55% of respondents would prefer to postpone the start of the mobility until the situation gets back to normal**; 31% of respondents would prefer to start their mobility as virtual learning and then use the opportunity for an experience abroad and only 5% would be ready to replace physical mobility entirely by virtual activities if there is no other alternative.

Youth work as a means of support

The RAY-COR study also provides evidence on an important dimension of youth work during the pandemic: it helps young people to deal with developments in a more meaningful and purposeful manner and supports them to cope with things. There is definitely a strong correlation between mental well-being and youth work, as **74% of responding young people agree that being involved in youth work gave them something meaningful to do and something to look forward to.**

A recent paper of the EU-Council of Europe youth partnership by Stefanos Mastrotheodoros (2020), *The effects of COVID-19 on young people's mental health and psychological well-being*, also indicates that youth work and youth services serve as an important psychological service for young people, providing a sense of belonging and higher life satisfaction, while lowering anxiety and depression.

Covid-19 and mobility in formal education

In this second part of the findings, we will discuss the impact of Covid-19 on mobility within formal education with its repercussions on non-formal and informal learning. In this section, we present the main research on formal education and student mobility and their findings, and discuss potential implications on youth development, well-being and learning. There are several pieces of research on the impact of Covid-19 on formal education and also on student exchanges (e.g. Erasmus student exchange). Importantly, we are not discussing degree-student mobility, with its particular impact on the functioning of universities financially, but concentrate on mobility learning opportunities within degree tracks or study programmes, in particular the ERASMUS+ programme.

The impact on international student mobility was abrupt – at the beginning of March 2020, country borders started to close in order to limit the spread of the virus and international movement, which constitutes the basis for internationalisation of higher education, ceased almost totally. Students in mobility – both in higher education institutions and also in other forms of mobility such as internships, trainings, projects or voluntary work, were faced with “closure”

of universities with distance learning becoming a substitute for face-to-face education. Students needed to take an urgent decision whether to remain in a hosting country, or to go back to their home country. In many cases students did not have a chance to take such a decision, as the mobility programme was simply cancelled or travel became impossible.

While the research conducted between March and May 2020 tries to picture the situation of the immobility crisis and how the emergency situation was managed by students and higher education institutions, the more recent research in the autumn should paint a picture of how institutions are slowly adapting to new circumstances. While for the students in the first wave of the pandemic the halt in mobility came as a shock, those who went to study abroad, participate in projects, or do internship in the second part of the year had a chance to consider the probability of a second wave of the pandemic.

March mobility ban with its consequences

In relation to the immediate impact on mobility, the report of the Erasmus Student Network (2020), based on about 22 000 answers received through an online survey, indicates that **about a quarter of mobilities were cancelled – with most students continuing (65%)**. Also, the institutional-level data from the IAU Global Survey on Impact of COVID-19 indicated that the mobility programmes were severely disrupted: **33% of respondents from higher education institutions declared that all their mobilities were cancelled and 43% answered that student exchanges with some countries were cancelled** (IAU 2020). An EAIE survey with representatives of European Higher Education Institutions in February/March 2020 reveals that in relation to inbound mobility, there were mostly cancellations or postponement of activities, while in relation to outbound mobility also the changes in destinations were applied. In fact, in the first wave of the pandemic, mobility was rarely replaced by, for example virtual participation (EAIE 2020: 15).

As far as the impact of the continuation of mobility is concerned, according to a survey with Erasmus students, **about 42% of those abroad decided to stay in the host country and 40% decided to return home**, with 8% unable to start their exchange, 4% stuck/unable to return and 5% undecided (ESN 2020). This situation might have depended on the country, e.g. in the case of Finland, at least 30% of incoming students remained in the host country (Finnish National Agency for Education 2020). As qualitative interviews with students at one Polish university revealed (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020), **it had been a difficult decision whether to continue mobility in these particularly uncertain circumstances**. As this case study reveals, the decision-making process relied on several factors: a changing epidemiological situation in the home country in comparison to the host country, lack of clear information on border closures/re-openings, educational programmes planning, scholarship and visa regulations, but also on students' feelings of security in a foreign country. Being able to communicate in the local language and strength of social networks in the hosting country were also seen as very important,

particularly in the case of contraction of the virus (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020). In other countries additional factors were also important, in particular loss of employment, which impacted on students' economic situation (Cairns et al. 2020).

The vulnerable situation of international students was clearly seen in relation to their possibility of returning home after the pandemic spread – **a number of students could not go home due to travel restrictions or lack of transport (among ESN respondents, these constituted 4%)**. Some students were waiting for repatriation flights for extended periods of time, feeling abandoned by their home countries (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020).

Beyond the problem of returning to the home country for some, other critical issues for students was lack of access to basic needs (such as food or sanitary products), problems encountered with accommodation, which was cancelled or closed, or missed access to medical support. Problems with visas or residence permits, while not that common, were characteristic to non-EU students with 3.6% encountering this problem (ESN 2020). A qualitative study (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020) confirms that **non-EU students reported more challenges in relation to visa regulations or scholarship** (e.g. US students). These challenges, particularly coupled with other difficulties, had a major impact on their psychological well-being, study motivation and stress levels. Also, students from non-EU countries faced more issues regarding to the possibility of returning home (Cairns et al. 2020, Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020), though some non-EU students were less surprised at this inability to travel than some EU students who had trouble returning to their countries.



Figure 10 - major problems encountered by students

Major problems encountered by students (ESN 2020)

According to the ESN study, **6% of Erasmus students encountered discrimination on the basis of their nationalities** – this in particular related to Asian and Italian students. As noted by

researchers, in Portugal Erasmus-related infections were visible in the media, which could be seen as a potential basis for negative attitudes towards young foreigners (Cairns et al. 2020).

Another issue regarding the mobility is foreign students' loss of their economic grounds for mobility. While, **according to the ESN survey – in March 2020, most students did not know what would happen with their grants or financial support (65%)**, most regulations were adjusted to the pandemic crisis within a few months. Still, the period of suspension revealed particularly stressful for students who were left without funds in a foreign country. (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020). Additionally, with scholarship covering only part of the expenses abroad, some students had financial issues as they lost jobs due to the pandemic crisis and restrictions (Cairns et al. 2020).

Mobility online – impact on learning

In response to the pandemic **most of the HEI transferred their classes online** or suspended them – the IAU Global survey indicates that 65% of their survey respondents indicated moving education fully online (2020). In fact, **most of the mobility students also moved to online education** (85% of ESN Survey respondents), with 9% with no offer or classes cancelled and 5% continuing normally. A qualitative study shows that the fact that learning was moved online constituted a lot of challenges, but most importantly was very positively evaluated (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020): study respondents affirmed the possibility to study online as a basis for their status as a student. Despite the difficulties, it was claimed as a critical activity that structured their day and provided students with a direction in a difficult period.

In regard to the experience of studying abroad, the non-formal learning dimension and also very important informal learning before and after class were missing. We may ask to what extent this intercultural dimension of study abroad can be brought into the virtual classroom. The research on Erasmus study abroad underlines the importance of participation in the international Erasmus bubble and its potential for learning (Cairns et al 2018; Cuzzocrea et al. 2021) – and, in fact, this dimension is the one absent or at least severely limited in the context of the pandemic. The qualitative study reveals strong feelings of isolation in international students, in particular those who arrived to their host university just before the lockdown, and in effect did not have time to create bonds (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020). The virtual connections were present but were no substitute for face-to-face contact.

Supporting structures in the pandemic

The joint paper developed by ESN and IAU (ESN and IUA 2020) stressed the **need for HEI to develop contingency plans in relation to crisis situations** – to strategically analyse what elements of student support are necessary to support students holistically. Similarly, the project at Jagiellonian University resulted in the list of recommendations potentially to be used in other crisis situations (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020).

The access to tailored information for students provided in English was stressed as critical in crisis situations. As the ESN study (2020) indicates, **most students had access to information regarding health measures or travel restrictions (about 2/3 claimed such information was available at least to a moderate extent), 74% confirmed the information was available in English.** The qualitative study in Poland suggested the necessity to provide clear and prompt access to information through a one-stop shop (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020). As non-EU students were particularly vulnerable in the crisis situation, universities should provide more targeted legal aid (a centre/person responsible for this), particularly to non-EU students in relation to visa issues, stay permits and other matters concerning their legal status. Students were in general happy about HEI efforts, still in some regards the information was not provided in relation to certain issues, or it was not provided in English.

Beyond support in logistical and educational matters, qualitative studies indicated **the need to consider students' psychological well-being and necessity to provide support in this regard** (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020).

The DAAD report also confirms the support available for returning students. In most surveyed universities, three measures were applied by universities: financial support for the costs of returning to Germany, assistance with the organisational planning of the return journey, and helping to reintegrate these students into current classes in Germany (through, for example, recognition practice or an adapted curriculum) (DAAD 2020).

Mental health and well-being in mobility

Similarly to that of the general population, young people's mental health issues were more pronounced in the pandemic – e.g. above **40% of ESN respondents reported that they had experienced anxiety and stress** to a great extent or to a very great extent during the last two weeks. Interestingly, the stress was higher for those students who decided to return home than among those who stayed in the host country – which shows the costs of losing a chance for mobility and the myth of home-comfort for learning. **The feeling of loss of mobility experience, being “deprived” of a year abroad or a feeling to be forced to go back home contributed to the negative evaluation of one's well-being** (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020). Due to restrictions, students “stuck” (as they themselves described it in the above-mentioned study) in the host countries were cut off from social contacts, not only in relation to interactions with other students, but also having no other support from their family than through online communications – in fact, among all Erasmus participants, **21% reported isolation and social exclusion** (ESN 2020).

In fact the recent educations.com survey (educations.com 2020a), to which 1 400 students responded, **56% of which were international students, shows that after the pandemic students**

started to value more availability of mental health services from the university and that it increasingly becomes an important factor for their choice of institution for study abroad.

New academic year of 2020/2021 – readjusting

While some research initiatives were launched in 2020 regarding the impact of COVID-19 on learning mobility, there is still a need for careful examination of the long-term effects. Many programmes started their classes in a traditional face-to-face mode after the spring lockdown, or using blended approaches, with the second wave of the pandemic in October many HEIs went back to online mode.

The studies in general indicate that students are postponing their study abroad experience. When it comes to the drop in participation in the Erasmus+ higher education exchange, for example in Portugal, provisional figures from the **Portuguese National Erasmus+ Agency suggest a reduction of 39% in incoming mobility**: 5 200 in September compared to 8 480 in 2019 (Cairns et al. 2020). Among selected Polish universities, we observe a drop of about 40-50%.

Also, those Erasmus students who were “trapped by COVID” during their exchange, when asked about formulating an “ideal advice” to those people who plan to carry out a mobility in the coming months, would suggest them to “**postpone the start of the mobility until the situation gets back to normal**” (55%), cancel (9%) or “start their mobility as virtual learning and then use the opportunity for an experience abroad” (31%). Only 5% would suggest replacing physical mobility entirely by virtual activities if there is no other alternative (European Commission 2020).

The studies indicate that students tend to postpone their mobility plans (QS Quacquarelli Symonds 2020), with universities adjusting to this development as foreseeing decline in participation (DAAD 2020). In April, **just over 42% of students intended to postpone their study abroad plans with the goal of resuming studies at a later date while in October this number was 39%** (educations.com 2020b). As students are looking forward to the experience of physical mobility, they choose to postpone it rather than to substitute it with virtual mobility – e.g. **just under 55% of students planning to study abroad would not be interested in an international education offered online** (educations.com 2020c). But, as the pandemic continues, more and more students start to take into account virtual options, at least temporarily until the universities reopen, the study reveals.

As demonstrated by Finnish research (Kurkala 2020), due to the pandemic, in spring 2020 **most of the mobility projects in general upper secondary schools and vocational education and training (VET) schools were cancelled, with about one fifth of schools carrying all or some projects virtually** (including virtual lessons, seminars, eTwinning). This study also shows that for moving online, technical skills are not as much of a barrier as **the lack of motivation in**

participating in projects that do not involve physical mobility. It was particularly difficult to involve students, with teachers **being a bit more eager to participate online.** **Moreover, the pandemic made it much more difficult for schools to search for new partners for projects, and** while some projects continue, losing partners might mean disappearing from the international co-operation network.

Discussion and policy implications

In this section, rather than summarising what has been presented in the report, we take a holistic approach and present a general overview of what the research on COVID-19 and the knowledge generated mean for learning mobility in Europe, and offer some discussion points.

Vulnerability of international travellers: The studies conducted in the midst of the first lockdown revealed a vulnerable status of international students in particular. While international students seem to have a different status than migrants – being seen as mobile privileged travellers – the pandemic equalised their condition with one of the other foreigners (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska and Modebadze 2020). The safety net of universities was not enough, particularly in relation to national regulations or barriers in relation to returning home. Such a crisis situation revealed the status of international travellers and the lack of preparation of institutions in the face of the crisis.

Impact on young people's development: As pre-pandemic studies indicate ([RAY-MON and RAY-LTE Studies](#)), mobility constitutes an important step for self-development, motivation for further learning – some studies suggest it constitutes an unprecedented space for self-realisation, but also for experiencing togetherness with other European young people (e.g. Krzaklewska 2013, Cairns et al. 2018, Cuzzocrea et al. 2021). It provides clear frames for intercultural education and learning – providing opportunities to study languages, to improve academically in foreign institutions, to reflect on one's study pathway in a transnational context. From a work perspective, it is a way to build an international professional profile to be able to work in given sectors, particularly those where mobility constitutes part of an employee profile. With the pandemic crisis, young people's projects and plans were at most halted – many young people are worried about the future and their careers. In the light of those findings, there needs to be a reflection on potential alternative spaces for young people's development. And, while physical mobility might not be replaceable, there are already ongoing efforts for virtual mobility projects that appear at least to some extent to provide opportunities for intercultural learning and competences development. Students and young people also take advantage of the virtual co-operation – this, though, seems (even if research is not yet available) to be benefiting students with high social capital or previous networks.

European identity and knowledge of the European institutions, policies and functioning: As pre-pandemic studies indicate ([RAY-MON and RAY-LEARN Studies, Cairns et al. 2017](#)), young people learn about the European Union, European institutions, youth policies and how the institutions function as part of their learning mobility experience. The learning mobility also contributes to the feeling of belonging and strengthens the feeling of being a European citizen. Learning mobility projects funded by the EU and the Council of Europe also offer a direct experience with these institutions and increase young people's awareness on the benefits of these institutions and their programmes. Now, with the learning mobility opportunities limited and restricted, and some projects going online, special attention and emphasis to the sense of identity and belonging should be given in the design, implementation and evaluation of projects. Also, an Erasmus stay abroad provides clear frames for enacting being European through participation in the European Erasmus bubble (Cuzzocrea et al. 2021).

Weakening structures in relation to mobility through youth work: The youth organisations have been losing budget and funds. With the prolonged negative economic consequences of the pandemic, this trend is likely to continue and even worsen. The independent youth organisations that do not benefit from the support and tutelage of the state institutions or major organisations are facing severe financial difficulties. The restrictions, curfews and lockdowns have prevented them from realising the projects they have planned for 2020, thus not being able to use most of the budget they have been allocated with (such as mobility projects funded by the European Commission Education and Youth programmes). Furthermore, several organisations faced major economic difficulties as a result of cancelling their planned activities thus recurring certain costs such as non-reimbursable travel tickets or accommodation arrangements that were already in place. The restrictions and curfews also seem to prevent any fundraising activities that the organisations traditionally benefit from, which is another major setback. Thus, it is a dire implication that youth organisations are facing, and will continue to face, major economic difficulties, to the degree of being forced to shut down for not being able to pay their operational costs. Organisations that rely on learning mobility projects, such as work camps and secondary-level student exchanges, were unable to realise any actions in 2020 and very likely not to have any activities for 2021 as a result of the ongoing uncertainty. These organisations face a serious possibility of closing down and losing their partnerships and agreements. There is a major possibility of shrinkage of the youth work organisational sphere, decreasing and limiting the opportunities offered to young people, in particular in smaller cities and in rural areas where the operating organisations are already small in number.

From the perspective of youth workers, trainers and facilitators, the situation is also worrisome. Many youth workers have faced loss of income and even lost their jobs due to cuts and closures of youth organisations and projects. Youth workers and trainers that used to work freelance are also facing serious loss of income due to the cancellation of almost all projects. Some were able

to adapt and make the transition to online and digital youth work, but some of them need a transition period and additional training and capacity building. In addition, youth workers and trainers have reached their levels of knowledge and developed their competences through years of training, experience and ongoing learning process. On the basis of a sudden and forced switch to online youth work, they need some time to *unlearn* some of their practices and approaches as well as *learn* new ones. If this transition is not supported or allowed, there is the risk of simply trying to carry everything done in physical environment to digital space, which would severely impact the quality. It is important to start and commit to an engaged dialogue with youth workers and trainers, and offer support during these times. The petition launched by the International Youth Work Trainers Guild, "[Responding to the Impact of COVID-19 on International Youth Work Mobility](#)", is an important call and should be taken into consideration.

Loss of social capital and difficulty of networking: Youth organisations and youth workers mainly operate on their social capital, especially for learning mobility projects. They rely on their partners, linkages, networks and word of mouth connections to create new projects, to find new partners, to recruit new volunteers. With the lockdowns and curfews and suspension of physical activities, such social capital is likely to erode and weaken. Without regular contact with young people, some organisations are likely to lose their contacts and regular networks that support their activities. As recommendation from a peer is one of the most popular recruitment methods, the breaking of the chain of ex-participants recruiting new ones is likely to have a serious impact. The international co-operation framework is proven to have an important impact on the functioning of educational institutions or youth organisations – it is a learning framework but also a framework of making youth work attractive to young people who are in search of intercultural contacts and projects.

Loss of income for young people: Due to the closure of businesses and the restrictions in place, many young people have suffered economically. Loss of part-time job opportunities, seasonal jobs such as those in the tourism industry and additional income through tutoring, music classes etc. have all diminished. As a consequence, young people have to focus on their immediate living expenses. This would imply that the number of young people who need financial assistance to participate in learning mobility opportunities will increase. Young people facing economic difficulties may have further and deeper obstacles to participate in mobility projects, affecting inclusion and diversity.

Inclusiveness: Indeed, the processes of distinction making through mobility were identified in the studies in recent years (King 2011; Hof 2017) – the inclusiveness of mobility programmes is a key point, also in the light of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. As many students rely on small jobs to sustain their mobility or to save money for future travels, this might have an impact on who participates in mobility

programmes. In the pandemic many young people lost jobs, or worked reduced hours – and mobility with current grant schemes in Erasmus+ is not possible without additional resources, which are usually family resources – which could have decreased as well during this year.

Intercultural learning through virtual tools: While moving to distance learning or distance work on some youth work projects was an abrupt move in the light of the pandemic, with the prolonged experience of learning online there needs to be ongoing research and reflections on possibilities to strengthen the intercultural learning dimension in virtual learning. While virtual mobility was already discussed in 2007 in a Green Paper on “Learning Mobility”, its real potential for development was brought upon by today’s epidemiological conditions. While virtual mobility is usually not the first choice (European Union 2019), it is being chosen by those who see no other option – with the pandemic still developing, young people increasingly consider this option as an alternative. There is still a need to think of tools and pedagogies for virtual learning. For youth work, this situation gives a chance to develop digital youth work, which in some countries has already been popular.

Decline for individual motivation for virtual international projects: Mobility in a physical sense is a strong motivation to take part in projects in upper secondary schools, while the virtual projects are not considered to be very attractive to that age group. We need to reflect on other motivations to keep international co-operation going and students to gain intercultural skills.

Going back to internationalisation at home: As indicated, virtual mobility is not considered an attractive option by many young people, so we shall reflect on going back to the notion of internationalisation at home that was quite popular about 10 years ago. The youth organisations and higher education institutions often have resources at home that could bring to their students differing forms of intercultural learning. With travel limitations still in place, we should reflect on how to better use local resources and potential for intercultural learning and experiencing diversity.

Reconsidering intensive mobility and its role in youth trajectories: Most research indicates that the pandemic had negative effects on young people’s mental health, as a result of the stress related to lifestyle changes. For example, study of Swiss young adults, revealed higher anger and stress level (Shanahan et al 2020). There are some indications that the share of young adults felt better (about 20%) due to deceleration of their life (Shanahan et al 2020). A similar trend could potentially be considered in relation to mobility. Super-mobile students described by Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska (2021) indicated having a rush for more and more mobility, which calls for questioning if so much mobility is actually necessary or useful. Thus, it might be necessary to consider the new perspective on mobility, in relation to sustainability and ecological footprint.

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