D4.8. RUN-EU EUROPEAN MOBILITY INNOVATION CENTRE POLICY PAPER

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1. Introduction

Internationalisation in tertiary education has moved to the centre of Higher Education Institutes' (HEIs) strategic agenda since the 1990s in response to increased globalization, the requirements of the knowledge economy and the end of the Cold War (De Wit and Altbach 2021). As a result, HEIs have increasingly become aware of their role and responsibility in educating future-proof, culturally sensitive and resilient professionals ready to cope with the challenging realities of the twenty-first century knowledge economy.

Student mobility has long been at heart of institutional and educational programmes' internationalization strategies. Traditionally, it refers to international students taking a full degree abroad or students participating in a short-term, semester or year programmes abroad (Knight 2012).

A plethora of recent studies on international student mobility suggest it is an avenue through which only a very limited number of students are exposed to internationalisation of higher education. Moreover, study abroad is found to reinforce existing social inequities as it is solely accessible to those with sufficient financial means (i.e., Kommers and Bista 2021; De Wit and Altbach 2021). Therefore, internationalisation strategies have shifted towards more inclusive forms, such as internationalisation at home, however, Van Mol and Perez-Encinas (2022) note that broadening the types of mobility activities will not be sufficient in catering to a larger student population as students from lower socio-economic backgrounds will still be less likely to participate. They suggest that integration of internationalization in formal curricula might lead to the highest degree of inclusivity.

Internationalisation of higher education is a dynamic field of study which is constantly undergoing changes as it is not detached from societal developments and challenges, e.g. climate and equity discussions, and it needs to be responsive to these to remain relevant (De Wit and Altbach, 2021). Additionally, Strielkowski (2022) illustrates this responsiveness by arguing how, faced by the COVID-19 pandemic, HEIs quickly gravitated towards technological innovations and various online education tools to innovate the ways in which they offer international student mobility. The pandemic forced HEIs to recalibrate and identify new ways of designing meaningful teaching and learning pathways, a transition which might otherwise have taken many years.

Purpose

At the tail-end of second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Mobility Innovation Centre was established within the context of the RUN-EU alliance. As the name suggests its main aim is to serve as an expertise centre for all aspects involving mobility and to facilitate and boost student and staff mobility at all levels between the RUN-EU partners by combining traditional approaches to mobility with new, innovative and sustainable forms.

The current state-of-affairs in academic debate shows a wide array of perspectives on what innovation in terms of student mobility means as its conceptualization is heavily contextually influenced and contingent on, among others, institutions and respondents' level of experience and geographical location. Therefore, it is important to reach consensus within the RUN-EU

alliance as to how to define and interpret innovative student mobility within the context of the RUN-EU alliance. The present study does not serve as a purely theoretical exercise, but it is rather practical and contextual in nature allowing for the creation of a common language.

With this purpose in mind, the following research questions were formulated:

- RQ1 What are the most important features of innovative student mobility?
- RQ2 What are the greatest barriers to innovative student mobility?
- RQ3 What are the greatest facilitators of innovative student mobility?

2. Method

2.1 Research Design: The Delphi Technique

The Delphi technique encompasses an "anonymous iterative process of expert judgments on a specific issue, with the aim of collecting consensus and dissent" (Ab Latif et al. 2016). It is particularly utilized for exploratory studies in case of incomplete or uncertain knowledge; it aids in finding a common language (Holsapple and Joshi, 2002).

Delphi studies follow a systematic approach with clear guidelines. It is essential appropriate experts are selected as these serve as the key sources in such studies (Okoli and Pawlowski 2004).

2.2 Panellist selection

For the purpose of this research project, four distinct and homogeneous groups of experts were identified.

> 1- Academics (professors, researchers)
>
> 2- Practitioners (International Office
>
> 3- Students (particularly those serving on the RUN-EU Student Council)
>
> 4- Representatives of national agencies related to internationalization of higher education.

A Knowledge Resource Nomination worksheet was utilized to ensure a sufficient number of experts with relevant experience and knowledge on international student mobility. Each RUN-EU institution approached appropriate experts to request their participation in this study. If they consented, their contact information was provided. By asking each institution to recommend participants for each expert panel a representative sample, both in terms of expertise and geographical location, was achieved.

Table 1 shows the key characteristics of the study respondents and Table 2 provides an overview of the geographical distribution of respondents.

Table 1 – Respondent characteristics (round 1)

Panel Composition	# of respondents
Academic (professor, lecturer)	12
Representative of national internationalisation agencies	4
Praactitioners (International Office/ Internationalisation Coordinators)	23
Students	23

Table 2 - Geographical distribution of respondents (round 1)

Panel Composition	# of respondents
Austria	13
Finland	9
Hungary	13
Ireland	2
Netherlands	8
Portugal	17

A total of 109 potential respondents were initially recruited to participate in this study. In the first round, 62 respondents (57%) provided input. In the second round, 48 responses were recorded, of which 41 were valid. In the final confirmatory round, 27 respondents participated in the validation of the results of the previous round.

2.3 Data collection and analysis procedure

A quantitative approach was chosen to ensure respondent anonymity and prevent respondents from influencing one another. Other practical reasons for selecting a survey-based format had to do with the geographical dispersion of the respondents and time constraints. The present study was conducted between July and October 2022 and consisted of three iterations.

The first round of this study sought to solicit information from the four expert groups to identify pertinent features of innovative student mobility as well as challenges and facilitators associated with such innovations. Respondents were asked to provide, in an open format, their answers. Following the first data collection round, the data generated was coded and categorized. The factors identified were also matched with definitions which were formulated based on the answers provided.

During the second round, respondents were presented with consolidated lists of features of innovative student mobility, challenges and facilitators and asked to rank them (on a 5-point Likert scale) based on their respective agreement and importance. Once the data collection was complete, the mean score for each item was calculated in Excel, allowing for the ranking of items. As a result, three rankings were generated for each of the topics studied.

In the final round the aim was to confirm and validate the relative salience of items. Respondents were asked about their agreement with the rankings generated in the previous round. If they disagreed, they could re-rank the items to better reflect their perspective. Naisola-Ruiter (2022) notes the existence of different perspectives on when consensus is reached. In the context of this study, consensus was determined to have been accomplished as more than 70% of respondents validated each of the rankings compiled in the second iteration. Specifically, 70%

confirmed the ranking of features of innovative student mobility, 85% validated the challenges involved and 70% did the same for the facilitators of innovative student mobility practices.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

The European General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) was followed regarding data collection and storage. Anonymous codes were used during the analysis process and informed consent was obtained from respondents prior to the research. All panellists were asked to participate based on their expertise on the topic and agreed.

3. Results

Table 3 shows the ranking of features most associated with innovation in terms of international student mobility. Short-term mobility programmes are deemed most innovative, closely followed by blended forms of mobility. Both features deal with the format of the mobility activity and are clearly not mutually exclusively. The third most innovative component is rather a set of three features, which each obtained the same means score, namely, accessibility, tailor-made, and cultural immersion. At the bottom of the ranking, collective, defined as programmes focused on mobility groups rather than individual students, is considered least innovative, followed by three items which were each received the same mean score, mutual trust between institutions, transversal skills development and inter- and cross-disciplinary.

Table 3 - Ranking of features of innovative student mobility based on endorsement

Rank	Item	Mean Score
1	Short-term mobility programmes	3,65
2	Blended forms of mobility	3,63
3	Accessible Tailor-made Cultural immersion	3,56
4	Maximum recognition	3,54
5	Embedded in curriculum Purposeful	3,44
6	Inclusive	
7	Flexibility	3,41
8	Guided intercultural competence development	3,39
9	Sustainable	3,34
10	Acquisition of international learning outcomes	3,32
11	Affordable	3,24
12	Co-developed	3,23
13	New academic experience	3,22
14	Mutual trust between institutions Transversal skills development Inter and cross-disciplinary	3,20
15	Collective	2,85

Table 4 below provides an overview of the barriers standing in the way of innovative student mobility based on their relative salience. The results suggest economic factors, defined as being in possession of (in)sufficient financial resources availability and affordability, were deemed the most important barrier to innovative student mobility practices. The second and third barriers to which most salience is ascribed are a student's family or life situation and lack of information about various mobility options available. The rigidity of educational programmes to incorporate student mobility in the curriculum comes a close fourth in the ranking. Having inadequate language skills to successfully participate in innovative student mobility activities is considered the least important barrier, followed by resistance of academic staff members and limited availability of options to choose from.

Table 4 - Ranking of barriers to innovative student mobility based on their importance

Rank	Item	Mean Score
1	Economic factors (financial matters, affordability)	4,56
2	Family or life situation (in employment, having a child, other family circumstances)	4,23
3	Lack of information (about options)	4,05
4	Rigidity of educational programmes (lack of flexibility to incorporate mobility into the curriculum)	4,03
5	Lack of motivation (from student, or from institutional perspective)	3,9
6	Lack of recognition (extracurricular or no credits awarded)	3,74
7	Lack of support and/ or guidance (absence of encouragement)	3,73
8	No stimulating environment (no encouragement from family and/ or institution)	3,69
9	Lack of institutional expertise (capacity to offer and facilitate virtual learning)	3,60
10	Conventional wisdom about internationalization (seen as only encompassing mobility)	3,50
11	Resistance of staff (lack of commitment) Limited availability (lack of options to cater to all demand)	3,45
12	Poor language skills (Inadequate command of the language of instruction or host country)	3,38

As shown in table 5, the availability of financial support in the form of grants and scholarships is considered the most important facilitator to innovation mobility practices as this provides an equalizer effect. Recognition of the credits obtained through the activity is ranked second, followed by competent and supportive international office staff. Interestingly, technical aspects, such as IT expertise and virtual/ hybrid options, are considered least important facilitators,

which is seemingly at odds with the finding of this present study that blended forms of mobility were considered among the most innovative.

Table 5 - Ranking of facilitators of innovative student mobility based on their importance

Rank	Item	Mean Score
1	Financial resources (grants, scholarships, budget)	4,80
2	Recognition of credits (credits can be used towards the achievement of a degree)	4,69
3	International office (competent and supportive)	4,65
4	Integration in curriculum (i.e. not extracurricular) Mindset (open-mindedness)	4,48
5	Institutional budgets (availability of financial resources)	4,46
6	Support and guidance (Encouragement and advice)	4,38
7	Flexibility of rules and curricula (adaptability of curricula)	4,35
8	Information provision	4,31
9	Simple process (limited paperwork/ bureaucracy)	4,25
10	Clear benefits (added value)	4,23
11	Welcoming and stimulating host institution environment	4,18
12	Institutional decision-makers (commitment across HEI) Inclusive	4,1
13	Student ambassadors (peers serving as role models and info providers)	4,08
14	Technical (IT) expertise and infrastructure	3,78
15	Virtual/ hybrid options	3,71

4. Discussion

Generally, the data obtained through this study using the Delphi methodology provided valuable insight into the topic of innovative student mobility. The identification of commonalities in perspectives allows for further alignment of views within the RUN-EU alliance, or a so-called common language.

The endorsement of short-term mobility programmes and blended forms of mobility as being most innovative features of student mobility aligns with the chosen approach within the RUN-EU alliance to focus on short-term mobility in the form of its Short-Advanced Programmes (SAPs). By providing mobility grants for these short mobility windows, access to such opportunities is improved. This is also consistent with the findings showing that financial support or lack thereof serves as a key facilitator for participation in innovative mobility schemes. It reinforces the argument made by Van Mol and Perez-Encinas (2022, p. 13) about conventional forms of international student mobility being "a socially selective process whereby students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to participate."

The fact that a student's family or personal situation might be a barrier is consistent with the frequently made argument that traditional definitions of a typical student no longer apply. Increasingly, students are employed, at least part-time, follow dual tracks or work-study programmes. which is an issue in light of ongoing discussions on the implementation micro credentials to facilitate flexible and inclusive lifelong learning opportunities (European Commission, 2022).

The practical value of this study lies primarily in the clarity and consensus it provides. This is vital at the current stage of the RUN-EU alliance as it provides a solid foundation and strategic direction for development of future innovative mobility initiatives and the strengthening of the European Mobility Innovation Centre. Additionally, the findings provide further underpinning for the ways in which the RUN-EU alliance works on realising its mission to deliver future and advanced skills for societal transformation in EU regions.

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