

ERASMUS+ International Credit Mobility - a study of the mobility of disadvantaged students from Partner Countries

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1. Executive summary

The SPHERE consortium (University of Barcelona and the European University Association) was tasked by the European Commission to undertake a **study of the implementation of its policy towards disadvantaged students** in Key Action 107 of the Erasmus+ Programme. It was asked to make recommendations on the basis of its findings.

KA 107 supports International Credit Mobility (ICM) between Programme Countries and Partner Countries. This study focuses on **outgoing student mobility from three groups of Partner Countries**: the Eastern Partnership (6), the South-Mediterranean (10), and the Western Balkans (4). It examines the extent to which the Erasmus+ Programme's insistence on the **inclusion of the disadvantaged** is addressed by the Partner Countries and by the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) active in project partnerships.

The study is based on **three categories of source material**:

- the monitoring reports submitted to the European Commission by National Erasmus Offices (NEOs) in the Partner Countries;
- online surveys of the NEOs, of Erasmus+ National Agencies (NAs) in selected Programme Countries, and of ICM alumni and students who were mobile at the time of writing;
- online interviews with the NEOs and with five NAs, with selected Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs) in the Partner Countries, with selected International Relations Officers (IROs) in HEIs in both Partner and Programme Countries, and with ICM students;
- focus groups with NEOs and HEREs to validate the outcomes of the study.

From this rich and sometimes conflicting body of data the authors have drawn **reasoned assumptions** and made **relevant recommendations**.

Summary of findings

1. In order to address inclusion and diversity, the Erasmus+ Programme Guide proposes a wide-ranging and indicative **definition of disadvantage**. It covers the medical, psychological, socio-economic, ethnic, religious, political, gender and other cultural factors which can limit participation in the Programme. In most Partner Countries and in some Programme Countries, this definition is far from being supported by legislation and by a broad consensus of opinion.

2. The definition of disadvantage is broader than, but includes, the category of **'special needs'**. This refers to students for whom mobility would be impossible without the supplementary financial support available, on formal application, from the relevant National Agency.

3. Examination of the **Partner Country non-discrimination legislation** available in English reveals very little convergence either with the Erasmus+ definition of disadvantage or between Partner Countries themselves. Variation in law, custom and practice is extensive. Even for the most widely recognised mode of disadvantage – physical disability – there is no unanimously accepted definition.
4. Relevant **data collection** across the three regions is inconsistent. When collected, it may not necessarily be published. Certain categories of disadvantage – most notably those of sexual orientation – are declared by some informants to be ‘taboo’.
5. **Affirmative action programmes** nevertheless exist, sometimes at national level, sometimes at the initiative of the individual HEI. However, there is no evidence that these are applied at the time of the student’s application for mobility within ICM. This is the case, for example, of the 28% of the students responding to the survey who come from non-academic backgrounds. Moreover, there is no standard practice of keeping a record of the reasons for the non-selection of applicants.
6. The **selection of students for mobility** within project partnerships funded under ICM is generally undertaken jointly by the home HEI in the Partner Country and the coordinating HEI in the Programme Country. Despite variations of the criteria between, and sometimes within, project partnerships, the selection processes are regarded as transparent and fair by those who administer them. Some students, however, have strong reservations.
7. The principle of selection clearly stated in the Erasmus+ Programme documentation is that – all academic factors being equal – priority should be given to the disadvantaged. In practice, the role played by **considerations of disadvantage in the selection process** is minimal. Only a small minority of students reported being posed relevant questions.
8. The majority of the students surveyed considered that it would be feasible to ask applicants to declare any eligible disadvantage. When asked about their personal **readiness to self-identify**, many of them proved more cautious; their decision would depend on the risk of stigmatisation and the opportunity to secure additional funding. They would feel less hesitant if the disadvantage were officially recognised in their country.
9. Partner Country participants in general do not act on the knowledge that **Organisational Support** (OS) funding may be used to support more inclusive mobility. In fact, it is rare that the HEIs receive any share of the OS. They may be reluctant to press their case or they may simply be ignorant of the existence of OS. There is little evidence that they are active in the preparation of the Inter-Institutional Agreements (IIAs) foreseen by the Erasmus+ Programme.
10. Informants were questioned on the **obstacles to mobility**. In respect of disadvantaged students, the NEOs reported that the greatest impediment was the absence of appropriate prioritisation in the selection process. Second in importance came financial and logistic considerations – notably the costs which have to be met up-front by the students themselves – and the frequent delays in releasing and receiving

the Erasmus grant. This observation was strongly backed up by the students. Happy in general with the core grant, they require speedier delivery, as well as supplementation to cover the expenses incurred by visa application, the associated travel, and insurance.

11. Informants were also asked their views on the possible introduction of **quotas for disadvantaged students**. This proved controversial: many of the NEOs were in favour, while the NAs were strongly opposed, citing doubts concerning the definition of disadvantage and the absence of flexible funding mechanisms. There was some support for returning to the target group procedure which existed under ERASMUS MUNDUS 2.

12. On the question of **top-up awards**, NAs had mixed views. Those expressing reluctance to implement them cited the difficulties presented by the fact that ICM funding is not multi-annual and that there is no possibility to transfer funds between financial envelopes.

13. The problem of the **lack of consensus underpinning the notion of disadvantage** is fundamental. As long as differential interpretation persists, it will be impossible to estimate the real number of disadvantaged students whose opportunities for ICM mobility are fulfilled - or frustrated. Without a definition which is accepted Programme-wide, Partner Countries effectively opt in only to those aspects of the disadvantage policy which fit their legal and cultural profiles. The fragmented character of this situation actually promotes inequity.

14. Although it is not possible to calculate how many disadvantaged students lose out on mobility opportunities, it is clearly possible to reduce the number by giving much **greater prominence to the issue of inclusion**. Student awareness is paramount.

15. In principle the ICM can contribute to supporting disadvantaged students. This is demonstrated, as indicated above, by the fact that 28% of the students responding to the survey come from non-academic family backgrounds. Overall and regrettably, however, at present **ICM cannot be said to promote effectively and significantly** the mobility of disadvantaged students, or students from under-represented groups, from the Partner Countries.

Summary of recommendations

It is essential to note that, in the long-term, the Programme generates **in-built optimism**: the greater the number of ICM alumni, the greater the chances of cultural shifts in the Partner Countries and of more enlightened attitudes to disadvantage in the Programme Countries. ICM is a powerful agent of change, particularly when embedded in a strong commitment to reciprocity between the Partner and Programme Countries. This is immensely reassuring. The short- and medium-term measures proposed in this report, including tighter monitoring and better resourcing of the identifiably disadvantaged, together with more explicit Programme guidelines, will help to accelerate this process.

1. **All stakeholders**, prompted by the European Commission, should make strenuous efforts to **publicise and promote the opportunities** that already exist for participation in ICM by disadvantaged students. Open calls for applications should do this explicitly.
2. **NEOs** should advise HEIs on the state of **national legislation** on disadvantage, counselling them on how best to navigate the gap between it and the Erasmus+ definition and facilitating relevant staff development at all levels. They should, in conjunction with the HEIs and with the assistance of the Commission, collect and publish **accurate data** on the participation rates of disadvantaged students in ICM. NEOs should also ensure that they address the question of disadvantage in their monitoring reports, with particular reference to the criteria used to select the mobile students at project level.
3. **HEIs in Partner Countries** should ensure that in their **strategic planning** due attention is paid to the needs of disadvantaged students. The good practice developed should then be disseminated nationally by NEOs, as well as regionally and internationally in the framework of capacity building activities.
4. **Partner Country authorities** should consider how best to **translate into higher education practice the principles of non-discrimination** inscribed in their formal relations (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements, Association Agreements, etc.) with the European Union. In doing so, they should prioritise the creation of a climate in which potentially mobile students can feel free, if necessary, to self-identify as disadvantaged.
5. **Partner Country authorities** should also consider convening **national forums** to examine how to share among the relevant actors the burden of defining, encouraging, identifying and certifying disadvantaged students, with a view to facilitating their mobility.

6. **The Commission** should take steps to promote greater direct and reciprocal **communication between NEOs and NAs**, specifically with regard to matters concerning Organisational Support and Inter-Institutional Agreements. It should provide clearer guidelines in this regard. It should also consider whether and how to incorporate ICM alumni into the procedures adopted by selection panels.
7. **The Commission** should also consider options of how best to resolve the additional **financial problems faced by the economically disadvantaged**: instituting a unit cost to cover travel, visa and insurance; introducing measures to eliminate delays in releasing student grants; reverting to the funded target group system employed in ERASMUS MUNDUS 2; addressing the objections to top-up grants raised by Programme Countries.
8. **All stakeholders**, prompted by the European Commission, should address the issue of how to raise the **participation level of Partner Country HEIs located in non-capital cities** and in less well-endowed national regions.
9. Student satisfaction with ICM is, despite the obstacles identified in this study, very high. This cannot be over-emphasised. **All parties** should harness the **experience and enthusiasm of ICM alumni**, not only in programme delivery, but also in the making of policy to embed the Erasmus+ definition of disadvantage more effectively in the legal and cultural frameworks of Partner Countries. ICM alumni are the internal capacity builders of the future.

The authors leave the **final word** (Annex IV) to Esmā Gumberidze, a Partner Country student who, seriously disadvantaged, enjoyed successful study periods in two Programme Countries. We are very grateful to her for allowing her interview to be published.

2. Introduction

2.1. Background

The International Credit Mobility Programme (ICM) was launched (in 2015) under the 2014 Erasmus+ Programme. It supports student and staff exchanges between Erasmus+ Programme Countries¹ and various Partner Countries assigned, in line with EU financial instruments, to 14 regions². In 2019, the SPHERE consortium was commissioned to assess to what extent ICM mobility incoming to Programme Countries from three of these regions (Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership and South-Mediterranean) respects the principles of inclusion and equity laid down in the Programme. The consortium was also charged with making recommendations on how to enhance compliance.

While 6% of students mobile in intra-European Erasmus+ exchanges are categorised as disadvantaged, the comparable figure for regions 1, 2 and 3 of the European Neighbourhood is 2%. The issue of inclusion thus merits investigation. The present study set out to examine the reasons for such relatively low participation. Is the definition of disadvantage problematic? Why are the identification and mobilisation of disadvantaged students so apparently challenging? What is the scope of self-identification and what are the views of the students?

Beyond the issue of compliance with the rules and values of Erasmus+, the study will contribute to efforts to ensure that the European Union's neighbourhood and development funding is used in the best possible way. The topic of equity and inclusion in higher education is now firmly on the agenda of some Partner Countries and beginning to attract the attention of policy-makers in others. The authors trust that the scrutiny of inclusion in Erasmus+ in general and in ICM in particular will contribute positively to discussions and developments at the levels of both systems and institutions.

2.2. Methodology

The study considers outgoing ICM mobility from 20 Partner Countries³ in the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership, and the South-Mediterranean. An interim report presented in August 2019 contained analysis and provisional conclusions. These were based on monitoring reports drawn up by the countries' National Erasmus+ Offices (NEOs) in the years 2016-2018, as well as on surveys and semi-structured interviews

¹ The 28 EU Member States plus, at present, Iceland, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Turkey

² The full list of these can be found in the 2020 edition of the Erasmus+ Programme Guide, pp.23-24

³ The Partner Countries covered are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro (Western Balkans); Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia (South-Mediterranean); Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine (Eastern Partnership). No responses from NEOs in Belarus and Syria were received. The country codes used are listed in Annex II.

conducted between February and July 2019 with NEOs, Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs), and International Relations Officers (IROs) from universities in the Partner Countries concerned.⁴

This final report draws also on additional material obtained from surveys and interviews with staff from the National Agencies (NAs) and IROs in the Programme Countries and with students and alumni beneficiaries of ICM. Their perceptions are a valuable complement to the views of the Partner Countries. Together they allow a holistic account of the nexus of issues under scrutiny. They cover definitions of disadvantage and the measures available to address it, with particular reference to the selection of mobile students by project partnerships and the role played by inter-institutional agreements (IIAs) and Organisational Support funding (OS).

The methodology and draft conclusions of the study were discussed with the NEOs, HEREs and Programme Country experts who attended SPHERE events in the second half of 2019.

Unsurprisingly, the corpus of documentation discloses different profiles of disadvantage. It also reveals a measure of disagreement between informants from the same country. A lack of legal texts in English means that it is not always possible to resolve these differences in, for example, questions relating to the existence and content of national legislation in the Partner Countries. A much more detailed and granular survey is needed to eliminate some of the uncertainties.

This final report, like the interim report, therefore consists largely of (1) a record of what the authors have been told by different actors and stakeholders, and (2) what they trust are reasonable extrapolations from the data. The limited scope of the study has not allowed them systematically and comprehensively either to supplement or to verify all the information collected. There are no attributions to institutions or to persons, since opinions were canvassed on the basis of confidentiality. Attribution is, however, made to the NEO monitoring reports made available by the European Commission.

⁴ See the additional note on methodology in Annex I.

3. Defining disadvantage in the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership and South-Mediterranean

- Partner Countries are bound, in principle, to respect the Erasmus+ definition of disadvantage.
- In reality, their perceptions of disadvantage are many, varied, and with no systematically shared policy implications. The same situation exists, *mutatis mutandi*, in Programme Countries, where there is no robust consensus on disadvantage.

In the minds of the legislators and administrators who shape the Erasmus+ Programme, there is broad consensus on what constitutes disadvantage in relation to higher education. How far, geographically, legally and culturally, does this consensus extend? Is there a consistent definition of disadvantage in the Partner Countries and, if it exists, does it find expression in parallel policy initiatives? Is it reinforced by the attitudes prevailing in the Programme Countries? These were the questions that the authors brought to this study.

3.1 The 2019 Erasmus+ Programme Guide lists seven indicative categories of disadvantage:

- disability (i.e. participants with special needs⁵): people with mental (intellectual, cognitive, learning), physical, sensory or other disabilities;
- educational difficulties: young people with learning difficulties; early school-leavers; low qualified adults; young people with poor school performance;
- economic obstacles: people with a low standard of living, low income, dependence on social welfare system or homeless; young people in long-term unemployment or poverty; people in debt or with financial problems;
- cultural differences: immigrants or refugees or descendants from immigrant or refugee families; people belonging to a national or ethnic minority; people with linguistic adaptation and cultural inclusion difficulties;
- health problems: people with chronic health problems, severe illnesses or psychiatric conditions;

⁵ The Guide (p.45) explains the diagnostic and administrative significance of the term: 'A person with special needs is a potential participant whose individual physical, mental or health-related condition is such that his/her participation in the project / mobility Action would not be possible without extra financial support. Higher education institutions that have selected students and/or staff with special needs can apply for additional grant support to the National Agency in order to cover the supplementary costs for their participation in the mobility activities.' If students with special needs require an accompanying person, the supplementary support can include 'a contribution based on real costs'.

- social obstacles: people facing discrimination because of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, etc.; people with limited social skills or anti-social or risky behaviours; people in a precarious situation; (ex-)offenders, (ex-)drug or alcohol abusers; young and/or single parents; orphans;
- geographical obstacles: people from remote or rural areas; people living in small islands or in peripheral regions; people from urban problem zones; people from less serviced areas (limited public transport, poor facilities).

3.2 In some instances, the categories overlap. 'Psychiatric conditions' may well occasion 'learning difficulties' and do not necessarily fall outside the category of 'special needs'. But broadly speaking, the categories are intelligible and generous. They are an expression of EU social policy, acknowledging the educational, medical, economic, cultural, social and geographic factors which can limit access to transnational mobility. 'Disadvantage', however, does not normally carry the same legal weight as 'discrimination'. Accordingly, European perceptions of disadvantage do not translate automatically into the multifarious legal and cultural contexts of the Western Balkans, the Eastern Partnership and the South-Mediterranean.

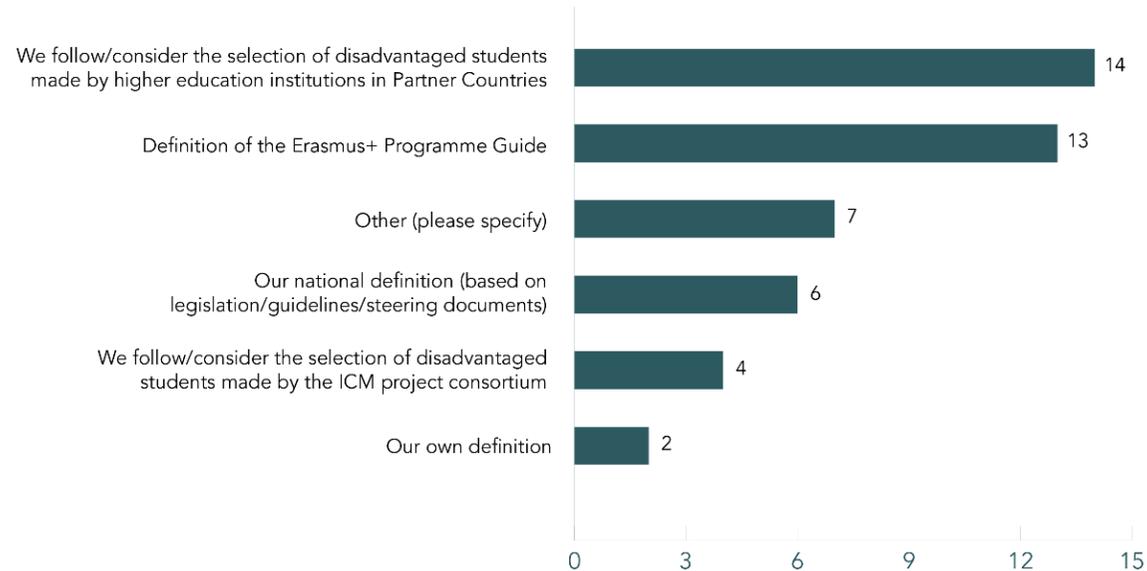
3.3 The authors set out to discover just how far the Erasmus+ definition of disadvantage is shared by Partner Countries in the three regions, when considered as sending countries. As indicated above, it relied on testimony from NEOs, selected HEREs, heads of IROs in the higher education institutions, and ICM alumni. In principle, the definition is accepted by all parties. This is because the Inter-Institutional Agreement (IIA) template used in ICM commits participating HEIs to *respect in full the principles of non-discrimination and to promote and ensure equal access and opportunities to mobile participants from all backgrounds, in particular disadvantaged or vulnerable groups*.

3.4 In reality, the picture is very varied. Implementation depends on a number of factors: whether the spectrum of disadvantage is reinforced by national legislation; whether it is supported by custom and practice; whether the NEOs stress the importance of the IIA obligations; whether HEIs and/or other bodies have the necessary measures in place; whether NAs and participating HEIs in the Programme Countries are successful in hard-wiring the Erasmus+ definition into each ICM partnership.

3.5 Even when categories of disadvantage have the same name, the similarity may be more apparent than real. Disability, for example, is not defined and addressed in all Partner Countries in the same way. It may be limited to 'visible' disabilities; it may or may not include particular chronic medical conditions. It may cover 'natural' disabilities or those resulting from hostilities. Physical disability may formally limit the access of certain sub-categories (e.g. the visually impaired) to particular disciplines. It may attract financial support, which in turn may be dependent on registration and the presentation of evidence of certification. Not all of these various possibilities have any assurance of recognition on a cross-border basis, either within or beyond the region concerned.

3.6 The fragmented map of disadvantage in the Partner Countries is mirrored in the Programme Countries. The majority of the latter are EU Member States. While the EU, invoking its legal competence for coordinating certain actions in the field of higher education, is able to formulate a multi-faceted definition of disadvantage for the Erasmus+ Programme, the relevant core policy strands (education, health, welfare) fall within the competence of each Member State. They may then be devolved to regions. The same is true of the non-EU Programme Countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Turkey). Definitions of disadvantage therefore vary, as does the choice of criteria with which measures may be implemented. The graph below clearly shows that NAs adopt differing stances. Those giving priority to the Erasmus+ definition represent only 38% of the total. A larger number (41%) abide by the various and varying Partner Country selection criteria, which - when operationalized across the full range of countries with their different practices - effectively acts as a guarantee of unequal treatment at Programme level.

Figure 1: Identification of incoming students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Source - survey of National Erasmus+ Agencies in Programme Countries)



3.7 Subsequent interviews with a sample of five NAs reveal an even more diverse picture. In one country definitions of disadvantage can be framed at the level of the institution. Another NA reports that it has no specific criteria. Another reports no criteria beyond the physically disabled. Two countries accept as disadvantage only that which has been defined and certified as such by the Partner Country authorities.

3.8 The overall picture which emerges is not encouraging. In practice, the Erasmus+ definition is regarded as a set of possible opt-ins, to be selected at whichever level and in whatever number is appropriate to the immediate context. The next section looks in greater detail at the legal situation in the Partner Countries.

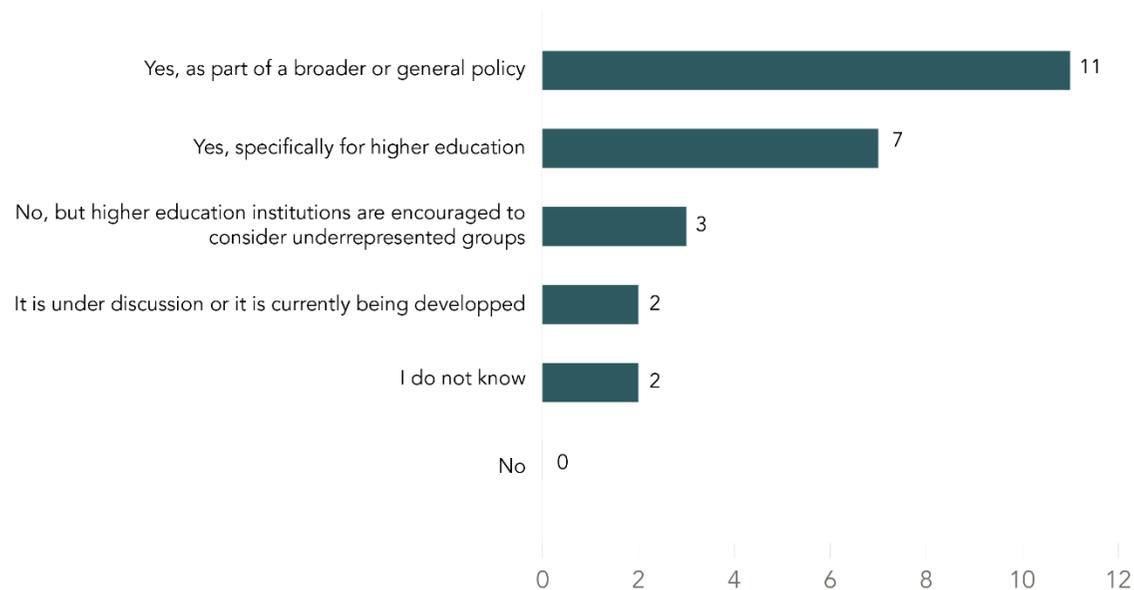
4. National legal frameworks

- Bosnia-Herzegovina, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia were unable to report the existence of legislation covering the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in higher education.
- There is no strong regional dimension to the distribution of obstacles to access; each country has its own distinctive profile.
- Eighteen NEOs assessed, for their respective countries, the significance of the seventeen sub-categories of disadvantage into which the Erasmus+ definition can be broken down⁶. Of the 306 possible entries, 29% were marked as 'not applicable'. Some of these cases fall within the category of 'taboo', that is to say, subject to social censorship.
- Partner Countries share no standard data collection practices.
- Affirmative action programmes nevertheless exist - at both national and institutional levels.

4.1 An online survey completed by eighteen NEOs (Belarus and Syria did not respond) in April 2019 showed that the national legislations of eleven countries have overarching provision for the disadvantaged, while seven have HE-specific legislation. Two NEOs said that legislation was under consideration, while a further two were unable to answer the question. The responses are set out in the graphic below. A more detailed overview is presented at point 4.2. However, it is important to stress that disadvantage is defined differentially, according to the cultural perceptions and pressures peculiar to each Partner Country, rendering data collection and demographic metrics problematic. Points 4.3 to 4.5 below provide detailed illustration of the crucial importance of this fact.

⁶ See Figure 5 below.

Figure 2: Legislation on the under-representation of particular groups in higher education in Partner Countries (Source: survey of National Erasmus+ Offices)



4.2 A slightly different view emerges when the outcomes of more recent interviews with NEOs, HEREs and IROs are added in to the results of the April 2019 survey. In thirteen of the twenty Partner Countries under scrutiny there is evidence of the existence of overarching legislation on disadvantage. Thirteen have legal provisions with a higher education focus. Ten countries belong to both groups. These indications, however, must be regarded with some caution. In interview, NEOs may confirm, amplify or qualify what they have said in the survey. Moreover, neither HEREs nor IROs necessarily share the NEOs' perceptions of national realities. On the basis of both the April survey and the subsequent consultations, it appears that four countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia) have no HE-specific legislation addressing disadvantage. A country-by-country overview is contained in the grid below.

Figure 3: Country-by-country overview of legislation on disadvantage in Partner Countries

Western Balkans				
	Overarching national legislation	HE-specific legislation	Observations	Legal instruments
Albania	√	√	Ministerial Orders address the needs of categories such as orphans, low income groups , the physically disabled and Roma , either by financial support or by setting HE entry quotas.	
Bosnia-Herzegovina	√		Informants declare an awareness of the importance of social inclusion , but are unable to cite relevant legal instruments.	
Kosovo		√	Kosovan respondents declare an awareness of the importance of social inclusion , and mention the Education Law of 2009 and the Strategic Plan for the period 2012 to 2020 drawn up under the jurisdiction of the former Serbian authorities. Both measures favour social inclusion which, it is said, the private sector has been more ready to address.	
Montenegro	√	√	Among the Western Balkan countries, only Montenegro has legal texts which are accessible in English. They cover ethnic minorities and sexual orientations , but the main focus is on the physically disabled . Only the latter group are registered; the remainder have the option of self-identification.	<p>"Strategy for Inclusive Education" http://www.mpin.gov.me/en/section/education-of-children-with-special-needs/86839/7075.html (EN) http://www.mpin.gov.me/en/section/science-and-higher-education/86888/7248.html (EN)</p>

Eastern Partnership				
	Overarching national legislation	HE-specific legislation		Legal instruments
Armenia	√	√	Respondents offer differing views: one reports that the country has inadequate data on social inclusion and no policy; a second mentions both broad-scope and HE-focused legislation on physical disability ; another reports that persistent taboos render the collection of all but the most basic data impossible. Only one informant instances a government decision of 2012 which regulates the admission to HE of certain categories of disadvantaged students: students with disabilities; students whose parents fought in the war against Azerbaijan; students who fought in the 2016 war in Nagorno Karabakh; students with two or more children . These students are given a fee waiver. In addition, according to the Law on HE, the state obliges Armenian HEIs to use at least 7% of the revenue from tuition fees to fund scholarships.	
Azerbaijan	√	√	National legislation makes provision for the physically disabled , according to legal texts available in English. Implementation is difficult in a cultural climate which is said by one respondent to stigmatise disability; institutions address the issue as best they can. There is national register of the physically disabled; all other categories are monitored at the level of the HEIs; there is no centralisation of this data and, as a consequence, no guarantee that the categorisations are consistent. By contrast, state payment of tuition fees on behalf of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is apparently unproblematic.	Law on prevention of disablement, rehabilitation and social security of disabled persons, 1997 http://www.ombudsman.gov.az/upload/editor/files/prevention%20disablement%2C%20rehabilitation%20and%20social.pdf (EN)
Belarus			No information has been forthcoming.	
Georgia		√	National legislation makes provision for the physically disabled , according to legal texts available in English. HE legislation is embedded in declarations of fundamental human rights. Beyond the physically disabled, policies target speakers of minority languages and residents of the contested areas in which hostilities have taken place. To these, Georgia gives financial support in the form of a fee waiver; the support does not cover maintenance. Georgia also gives special consideration (which includes a pre-entry year of Georgian language tuition) to Abkhazi, Armenian, Azerbaijani and South Ossetian students on a quota basis. HEIs produce statistical reports annually; these are assessed in the 6-year accreditation cycle.	Law on higher education, July 2018 https://eqe.ge/res/docs/20180702141554untitled.pdf (EN)

Moldova	√	√	<p>National legislation makes provision for the physically disabled, according to legal texts available in English. Provision and implementation are said to be limited; even so, each academic programme has an entry quota of 15% reserved for the physically disabled, orphans and Transnistrian students. However, the HEIs consulted had no clear view of national legislation and are said to lack the administrative infrastructure necessary for effective monitoring.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Law on the social inclusion of people with disabilities, 2012, http://lex.justice.md/md/344149/ (RO) 2. The Regulation on the organization of the Cycle II, 2015, http://lex.justice.md/md/360103/ (RO) 3. The REGULATION FRAMEWORK on the terms and conditions for the granting of scholarships for 1st cycle, 2nd cycle, integrated HE, medical and pharmaceutical education in HEIs, post-secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary and secondary vocational technical education institutions and postgraduate students, 2006 http://lex.justice.md/document_rom.php?id=F38E355D:76FC33F4 (RO) 4. The Framework Regulation on Organising admission in the Cycle I - Bachelor's degree, 2014 https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/regulament_de_organizare_si_desfasurare_a_admiterii_in_institutiile_de_invatamint_superior_din_republica_moldova_compressed.pdf (RO)
Ukraine	√	√	<p>HE legislation is embedded in declarations of fundamental human rights. Financial support is given to IDPs, as well as to students from families of military personnel active in the Donbass, and Roma. The Law on HE embraces a wider definition of disadvantage and allows access to be facilitated by entry quotas and by the boosting of entry grades. Beneficiaries have to be in possession of documentation certifying their disadvantage. HEI responses show that the levels of awareness and intervention vary.</p>	<p>Law "On Higher Education" (01.07.14), Arts. 3, 4, 9, 32, 33 https://zakon1.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1556-18 (Ukrainian) Law "On Education" (05.09.17), Arts. 6, 8, 20, 41, 48, 56 https://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2145-19 (Ukrainian)</p>

South-Mediterranean				
	Overarching national legislation	HE-specific legislation		Legal instruments
Algeria			In the view of one respondent, there is reluctance to address the issue of disadvantage, in view of its sensitivity, although it has recently given a push to the provision of accessible infrastructure for the physically disabled . Another respondent reports the existence of a statutory definition of disadvantage - the 'fragile categories' - covering the physically and psychologically disabled, orphans and foundlings, the aged, refugees, immigrants, and the poor . The statistics, however, are not published by the relevant ministry. In practice, it seems that, at HE system level, only the physically disabled constitute a separate category in receipt of financial support. All other categories are dependent for recognition on policies developed at institutional level.	
Egypt	√	√	Egypt declares its adherence to fundamental human rights in its Constitution; in the view of some respondents, this effectively guarantees equality of opportunity. The entry quotas set at national level (5%) target the physically disabled and Egyptian students living abroad , who decide to come home to study. Otherwise, it is up to the HEIs to determine whether to support particular categories of disadvantaged students. Social security data allows them to identify cases of financial hardship . Positive action in favour of women and persons with physical difficulties is relatively unproblematic, but in other categories self-identification runs the risk of stigmatisation. Syrian refugees are classified only as migrants.	Egyptian Constitution https://www.egypt.gov.eg/english/laws/constitution/default.aspx (EN)

	Overarching national legislation	HE-specific legislation		Legal instruments
Israel	√	√	On websites there is evidence of measures seeking to cater for the aspirations of groups in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. Accordingly, all documentation is produced in five languages (Arabic, English, Hebrew, Russian and Swahili), even though Hebrew is the official language of HE. Government provides funds against which HEIs can bid competitively to widen participation. Target groups include the Haridim (ultra-Orthodox Jews), who require a foundation year as well as segregation by gender, 'Israeli-Arab' students from East Jerusalem , and 'Ethiopian-Israeli' students ; both of the latter groups benefit from additional academic support.	Ongoing discussions to boost education among Israeli Arabs- https://che.org.il/en/?s=arabs Academic Excellence among students of Ethiopian descent https://che.org.il/en/complete-plan-encourage-academic-excellence-leadership-students-ethiopian-descent/ Plan for Integration of Haredim [ultra-orthodox] in Academia https://che.org.il/en/?s=ultra
Jordan		√	Jordan makes special provision (via initiatives taken by the King as Head of State, by government and by agencies such as USAID and British Council) for students from neighbouring war-torn countries , as well as for orphans, students whose parents have served in the army, students with disabilities, and students from remote areas .	
Lebanon	√	√	There is no official definition of disadvantage. Policy decisions on access by under-represented groups are taken at the level of the HEIs. The sole public university is committed to widening access and, while the private sector offers scholarships, it defines its target groups locally. Legislation (decrees) is not available in English.	
Libya			No information has been forthcoming.	

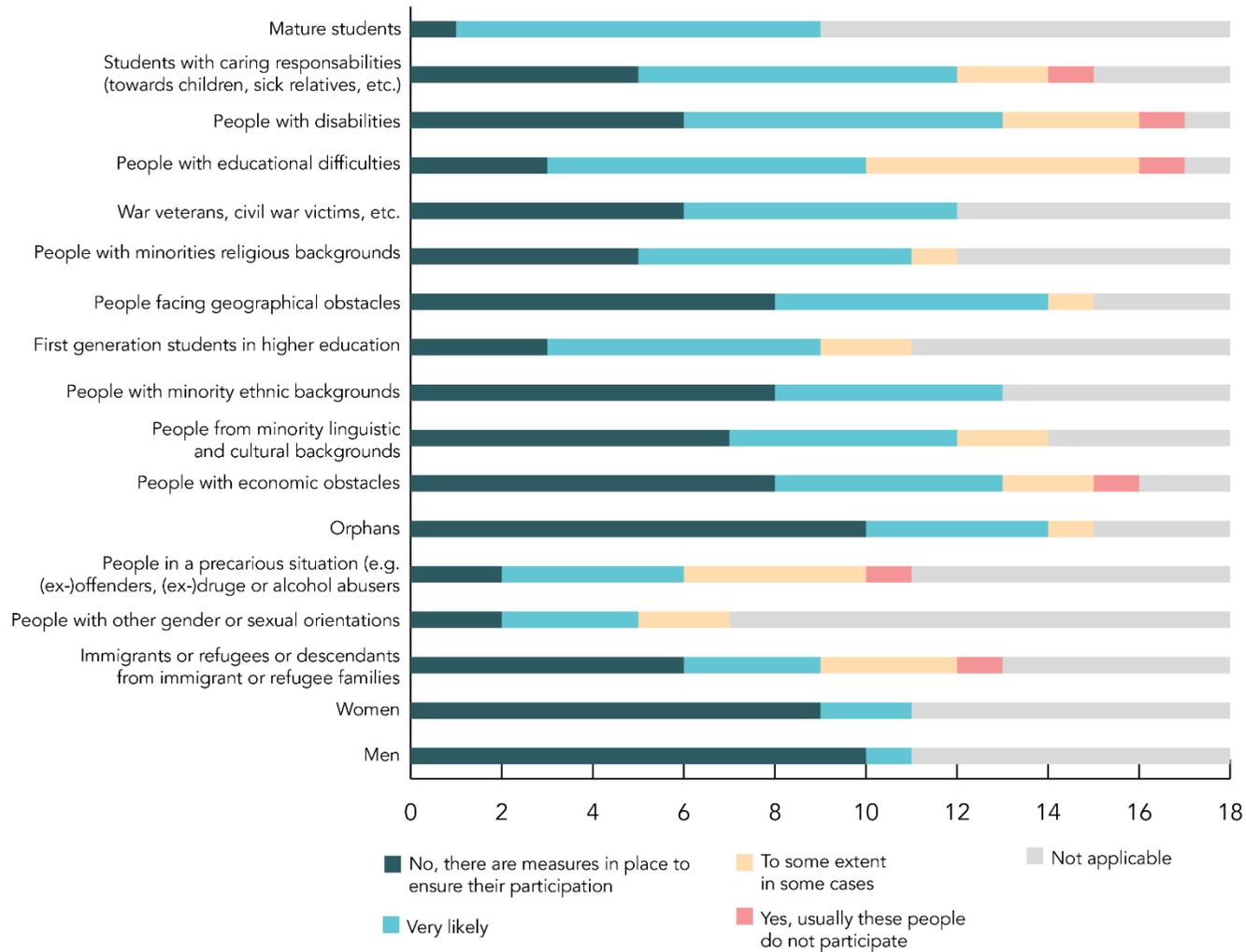
	Overarching national legislation	HE-specific legislation	Observations	Legal instruments
Morocco	√	√	Morocco focuses principally on the physically disabled and has made substantial efforts to meet their needs; there are, however, doubts about the effectiveness of the implementation. HEIs tend to identify only the visibly physically disabled and students from low income groups who are in receipt of scholarships. Students who self-identify run the risk of being stigmatised.	<p>Constitution of the Kingdom, www.sgg.gov.ma/Portals/0/constitution/constitution_2011_Fr.pdf (FR)</p> <p>Strategic vision of the education system reform (2015-2030) Lever 4, https://www.men.gov.ma/Fr/Documents/Vision_strateg_CSEF16004fr.pdf (FR)</p> <p>Framework Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities http://www.sgg.gov.ma/Portals/0/lois/Dahir_1.16.52_fr.pdf?ver=2016-12-14-124649-343 (FR)</p> <p>Legal measures relating to the rights of persons with disabilities https://cndh.ma/fr/bulletin-d-information/larsenal-juridique-relatif-aux-droits-des-personnes-en-situation-dhandicap (FR)</p> <p>Partnership agreement for the promotion of the rights of people with disabilities, between the Ministry of Solidarity and the Ministry of Higher Education http://www.social.gov.ma/fr/content/madame-bassima-hakkaoui-signe-des-conventions-de-partenariat-pour-la-promotion-des-droits (FR)</p> <p>Towards a national policy for promoting the rights of disabled persons in Morocco, 2015 (http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/FIELD/Rabat/images/SHS/20160823PolitiquePubliqueHandicap.pdf, (FR)</p>
Palestine			Respondents adopt the view that disadvantage is systemic and structural: the population regards itself as a refugee population. There is therefore no statutory definition. There are nevertheless sub-categories of the disadvantaged - notably the lower income groups, the physically disabled (including by acts of war), and the psychologically traumatised. On these, the Ministry of Social Affairs keeps accurate statistics. All other categories have the option to self-identify.	
Syria			No information has been forthcoming.	

	Overarching national legislation	HE-specific legislation	Observations
Tunisia	✓		The government provides needs-based scholarships to subsidise living costs (there are no tuition fees), the beneficiaries of which are known to the HEIs. HEIs are able to identify three types of disadvantage: physical disability, chronic disease; refugee status. Beyond these lies the possibility of self-identification, which is problematic. Claims of financial hardship are difficult to accept at face value because of the size of the informal economy.

The legal instruments listed in the table above are those reported in interviews by the various categories of respondents. The list is almost certainly incomplete. It can be supplemented by the references contained in the country fiches already in the possession of EACEA. Most of these, however, date from 2017 and may well not focus sufficiently on problems of disadvantage. If NEOs update the fiches appropriately, this will prove very useful to any future revision of the Erasmus+ programme.

4.3 NEOs were asked in the online survey which categories of students experience difficulty in accessing higher education. The graphic below shows the aggregate of their responses.

Figure 4: Categories of students experiencing major obstacles in participating in higher education in Partner Countries (Source: survey of National Erasmus+ Offices)



4.4 The same data can be presented as a country-by-country overview. The tabulation below shows the differences between countries to be far more striking than the regional commonalities. Where there are fairly common features – such as the prominence of the physically disabled – they tend to be supra-regional. However, this assertion is problematic, since the definition of physical disability varies, as indicated above. From the point of view of the Erasmus+ definition, the most interesting cells (shaded grey) are those indicating ‘not applicable’. These constitute 29% of the total. More detailed investigation would be needed to determine whether ‘not applicable’ means that:

- this particular group has no standing either in law or in public opinion as being disadvantaged
- the group is disadvantaged in law, but there are no remedial measures in place
- there are remedial measures in place, but demand is too low to be significant
- this group suffers no disadvantage and there is therefore no obstacle
- in the absence of statistics, it is impossible to form an impression, or
- this topic is regarded as taboo and cannot be considered

Cells indicating that there are appropriate measures in place account for 32%; reassuringly, they are the largest category. By contrast, ‘very likely major obstacles’ make up only 9% of the entries while ‘usually non-participant’ make up 2% and ‘to some extent’ 27%. The distribution of responses by column is unsurprising. Disabilities and learning difficulties are the categories to which ‘non-applicable’ applies the least; sexual orientation is the category to which ‘non-applicable’ applies the most frequently and to which the label ‘taboo’ tends to be attached.

Figure 5: Country-by-country overview of categories of students experiencing disadvantage in Partner Countries

region	country	physical disability	learning difficulty	economic obstacles	refugees	first-generation students	linguistic minorities	ethnic minorities	religious minorities	women	men	sexual orientation	mature students	war veterans	ex-offenders, etc.	carers	orphans	remote areas
Western Balkans	AL	light blue	light blue	orange	red	grey	dark blue	dark blue	dark blue	dark blue	dark blue	dark blue	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange
	BA	orange	light blue	orange	grey	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange	light blue	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange	orange
	XK	orange	orange	dark blue	grey	orange	light blue	dark blue	grey	dark blue	dark blue	grey	grey	dark blue	dark blue	light blue	dark blue	light blue
	MN	dark blue	dark blue	grey	dark blue	dark blue	dark blue	dark blue	dark blue	grey	grey	grey	grey	grey	grey	grey	grey	grey

region	country	physical disability	learning difficulty	economic obstacles	refugees	first-generation students	linguistic minorities	ethnic minorities	religious minorities	women	men	sexual orientation	mature students	war veterans	ex-offenders, etc.	carers	orphans	remote areas	
		Eastern Partnership	AM	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely
	AZ	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	
	BY	no information																	
	GE	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	
	MD	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	
	UA	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	
South-Mediterranean	DZ	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	
	EG	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	
	IL	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	
	JO	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	
	LB	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	
	LY	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	
	MA	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	
	PS	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	
	SY	no information																	
	TN	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	Very likely	

No, there are measures in place to ensure their participation	Very likely
To some extent / in some cases	Yes, usually these people do not participate
	Not applicable

4.5 The survey suggests a number of observations:

- A number of countries have **affirmative action programmes**, of two different types:
 - A. **National level action programmes** which are expressed in financial support to individuals or institutions, entry quotas, or exemptions from admission rules.
 - B. **Other programmes which are dependent on the initiative (and therefore autonomy) of HEIs** operating within their own catchment areas. These may be restricted when, for example, access to HE is managed by central government on the basis of a national entrance examination. Institutionally, they may take the form of preferential treatment for defined access cohorts, the provision of academic support prior to admission, or scholarships. However, the existence of a scholarship scheme is of itself no guarantee of affirmative action in favour of the disadvantaged: to be effective, it must clearly articulate appropriate criteria of eligibility, merit and need.
- The **category of disadvantage** most widely recognised is that of physical disability. This is not to say that its definition is shared or that it is addressed in the same way in all the Partner Countries.
 - A. The **most common target groups**, beyond the physically disabled, are low-income segments of the population, linguistic minorities (which may or may not be a proxy for ethnic or religious minorities), refugees and IDPs. Rural or geographically far-flung students are also the targets of widening participation initiatives in some countries. Informants report that while scholarships and fee-waivers may be available they are not always backed by support for travel and maintenance expenses. This is particularly critical with regard to housing when students are far removed from their families. Gender is relevant here, since in some cultures there is parental reluctance to allow daughters to live away from home in student accommodation; yet it is rare that women are the target of affirmative action.
 - B. In the interviews undertaken, **ethnic minorities** are more frequently specified than religious minorities.
 - C. Questions of **sexual orientation** are not addressed by any of the informants, except to say that in certain countries, particularly in the South-Mediterranean region, such matters are 'taboo'.
- There is no evidence of widespread and consistent **data collection**, either nationally or institutionally. Moreover, when data is collected it is not necessarily published. Data collection, in any case, depends on the legality or otherwise of, for example, **ethnic monitoring**. In the three regions under scrutiny, as indeed in the EU itself, there is, no doubt, variety of practice⁷.

⁷ The EU's Racial Equality Directive (DIR 2000/43/EC) establishes the 'principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin'. Article 5 asserts that the principle 'shall not prevent any Member State from maintaining or adopting specific measures to prevent or compensate for disadvantages linked to racial or ethnic origin.' Some Member States regard ethnic monitoring as an aid to positive action; others consider it to be potentially divisive.

- Where HEIs are at liberty to facilitate access by disadvantaged groups, **institutional initiatives** are likely to depend on a number of factors: either a substantial degree of formal autonomy or a strongly collaborative relationship with the ministry; an ability to apply for funding to support a widening participation agenda; access to donor support from a wealthy diaspora; a catchment area in which there is existing demand or the opportunity to stimulate demand; the professional and physical capacity (step-free access being the most obvious example) to accommodate disadvantaged groups with special needs; and the necessary vision to elaborate a relevant institutional mission capable of winning the support of all stakeholders. There is evidence that the provision of counselling services in HEIs is not at all uncommon; staff development on the topic of inclusion, on the other hand, is rarely mentioned by interviewees.

4.6 Not all countries have affirmative action programmes. Not all are able to demonstrate - on the evidence supplied to the authors of this study - that they have regard for the full range of Erasmus+ disadvantages. This does not mean that they do not. But it raises the question, familiar to EHEA Countries, of whether the absence of positive discrimination constitutes *de facto* negative discrimination. Respondents in many countries confirm that self-identification by students who feel disadvantaged is far from easy. If it is not the practice at the point of access to HE, it is unlikely that it will feature in the ICM selection process. The next section of this report looks more closely at selection.

4.7 As is universally the case, legislation does not necessarily mean full implementation. A more granular investigation is required to determine whether failure to implement, fully or partially, is due to inadequate resources (financial and/or human) or political will or both, and whether it is penalised.

5. The selection of students for ICM

- The vast majority of NEO monitoring reports are discursive, rather than responses to questionnaires, and do not necessarily cover all the points on which information is sought.
- ICM project partnerships deploy various selection methods: by home institution, by host, jointly. Despite variations of selection criteria, most methods are regarded as transparent and fair.
- Affirmative action programmes operating at the point of entry into higher education in the Partner Countries are not carried forward into the selection processes for ICM. This intensifies the pressure for self-identification by the disadvantaged, but self-identification is culture-dependent and therefore problematic in an international programme.
- It is not possible to extrapolate the real number of disadvantaged students who engage in ICM mobility.
- Among Partner Country NEOs there is a clear preference for the setting of quotas and targets for disadvantaged students. Among Programme Country NAs, on the other hand, there is strong opposition.

The next two sections look at the selection processes from a number of different angles. Who selects the students outgoing from Partner Countries? How commonly does disadvantage feature as a criterion of selection? (The students' view of these issues is reported in section 9 below.) To what extent is participation by the disadvantaged facilitated by the IIA and by the Organisational Support (OS) budget? Who, in the Partner Countries, monitors participation and who keeps records of the reasons for non-selection? How warmly would a system of quotas or targets for disadvantaged students be welcomed?

5.1 NEO monitoring reports are based on visits to participating HEIs and on discussions with staff and students. In the words of the ICM Handbook⁸, 'NEOs will [...] ensure that ICM projects are being correctly implemented and [...] provide support where needed. [...] Specifically, NEOs will be looking to [*inter alia*]:

- monitor compliance with the principles laid down in the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) as embedded in IIAs;
- ensure that Partner Country institutions use fair criteria for the selection of their participants and organise a transparent selection process;
- ensure that the Partner Country institutions offer the services foreseen for the participants which they send abroad or host;
- formulate recommendations to the Partner Country institution and contact the NAs (if necessary);

⁸ ICM Handbook, p.30, https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus2/files/icmhandbook_21122018_1.pdf

- keep the EC and the NAs informed of the monitoring visit results and follow-up, and bring any serious implementation issues to their attention.’

NEOs are also charged with monitoring the promotional material used in the selection process, to ensure that appropriate opportunity is afforded to disadvantaged students⁹. The reporting procedure involves responding to questions on disadvantaged students, the selection process, as well as on the OS arrangements (see section 6 below) enshrined in the IIA. The reports have a narrative format, which allows NEOs to pass over some of the questions. The reports document quite a wide range of practice in the selection of students for ICM. By contrast, as later sections of this study demonstrate, there is no such spread of evidence in relation to IIAs and OS. It is quite clear that, at least from the vantage point of the Partner Countries, IIAs and OS play a minor role in the management of ICM and make virtually no contribution to the mobility of disadvantaged students.

5.2 Figure 6: Overview of the NEO’s review of the selection process for ICM

region	country	YES 10	NO	Comment
Western Balkans	Albania	9	nil	All HEIs visited put out open calls for mobility applications. Selection was either by home or host HEI, or by two-stage process with host HEI making final decision. Criteria, when mentioned, were academic and linguistic. In one instance, it was recommended that the selection committee be decentralised; in another, that it be made more transparent.
	Bosnia-Herzegovina	14	nil	All HEIs visited put out open calls for mobility applications. Selection was either by home or host HEI, or by two-stage process with host HEI making final decision. Criteria, when mentioned, were academic and linguistic. Two HEIs are recorded as having published regulations which include the selection criteria. Six HEIs were required by NEO to establish procedures, or to review existing procedures, making them more transparent and better documented.
	Kosovo	8	nil	All HEIs made open calls, some on the basis of internal regulations. In one case, complaints had been received about unfair selection processes, but no further details were given by the NEO.
	Montenegro	2	nil	Both HEIs had transparent procedures; in one case, selection was made jointly, with final decision by the host HEI.

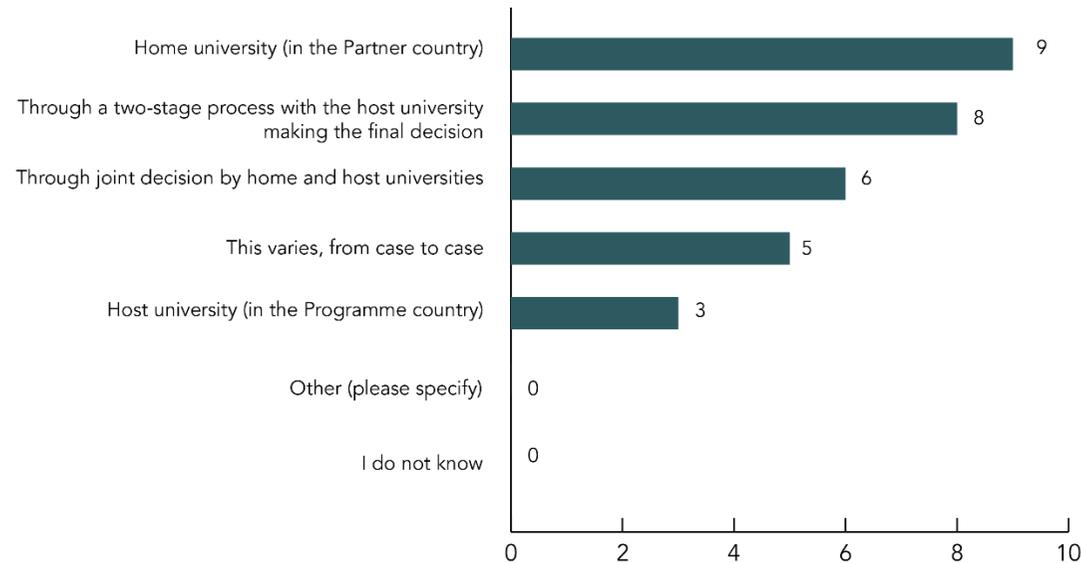
⁹ ECHE Annotated Guidelines, pp.3-4, https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/annotated_eche_guidelines_2016.pdf

¹⁰ The YES column indicates the number of reports that made reference to the selection process. The NO column indicates the number of monitoring reports that did not.

region	country	YES	NO	Comment
Eastern Partnership	Armenia	6	nil	Transparent selection processes with one exception. Final decision by home or host HEI, depending on the project. In two cases the NEO recommended open calls; in another two, it recommended a joint selection process, by home + host HEI.
	Azerbaijan	nil	nil	Only one monitoring visit undertaken. No mention of selection procedure or criteria.
	Belarus	15	nil	Selection by home, host or joint, depending on the project. Where criteria were mentioned, they were academic. In one instance, NEO recommended making the procedure more transparent.
	Georgia	6	nil	Transparent selection processes. Final decision by home or jointly with host HEI. One HEI has an appeals procedure.
	Moldova	12	1	As in other countries, various selection methods were used. In MD, the NEO noted that the variety caused confusion, particularly when different methods were employed by different projects within the same HEI. It noted too that when the host HEI failed to give reasons for rejecting applications, transparency was lost. It urged HEIs to give more time to the selection process, to move towards standard procedures, and to draft appropriate regulations. It reported that in one HEI, members of the internal selection committee had signed an affidavit confirming no conflicts of interest.
	Ukraine	10	nil	All selection procedures were reported to be transparent and fair, with feedback to applicants given systematically. In one HEI, the procedures were subject to QA oversight.

region	country	YES	NO	Comment
South-Mediterranean	Algeria	8	nil	Selection procedures were transparent; when conducted jointly, final decision rested either with home or host HEI. Criteria were academic.
	Egypt	4	1	A mixed picture; not every HEI featured central administrative responsibility, open calls or clear criteria.
	Israel	11	3	In the majority of cases, HEIs conducted open calls and had clear procedures. One HEI administered evaluation questionnaires, but in 10 cases NEO was insistent that HEIs develop QA processes to cover mobility, as well as seek feedback from host Partners.
	Jordan	16	6	A mixed picture; some HEIs had open calls, some devolved selection to Faculty level. NEO emphasis was placed on getting IROs set up with a defined role (8 cases) and clear selection criteria (3 cases).
	Lebanon	9	nil	On the whole, open calls using clear criteria.
	Morocco	6	1	Open calls. One HEI was recommended to publish the results of its selection.
	Palestine	11	1	On the whole, open calls using clear criteria.
	Syria	7	nil	On the whole, open calls using clear academic criteria; some decisions taken jointly with host HEIs.
	Tunisia	5	2	In the main, clear procedures. In one instance, NEO insisted on an open call.

5.3 *Figure 7: Selection of outgoing ICM students – the NEOs’ view (Source: survey to the National Erasmus+ Offices)*



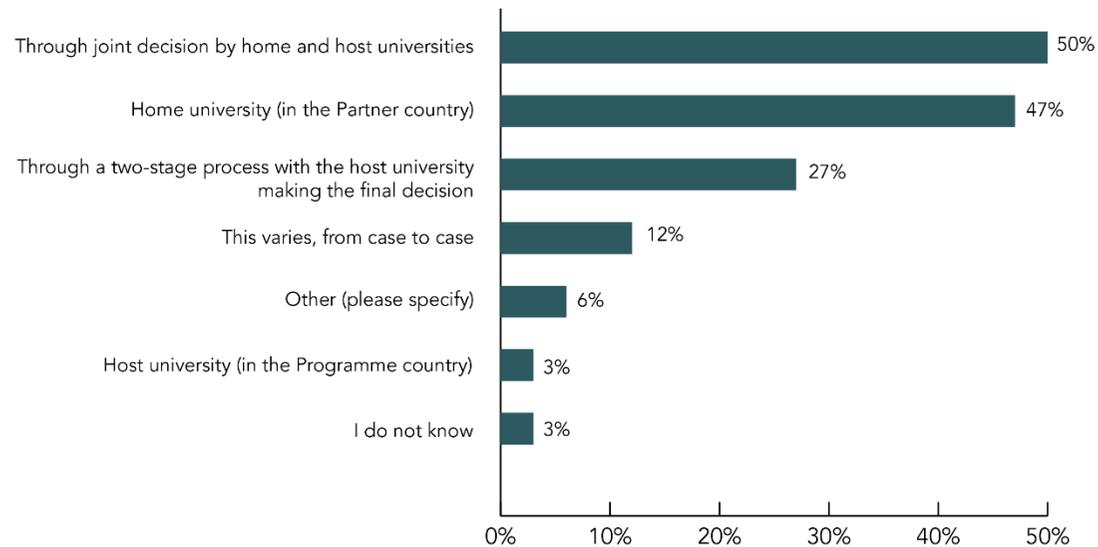
5.4 The Erasmus+ Programme Guide requires that students apply to ‘their HEI who carries out the selection of participants in the mobility action’¹¹. In practice, while applications by students must go to the home institution in the first instance, the actual selection process admits of various possibilities. Notable in both the monitoring reports and the survey of NEOs is the fact that selection is often made jointly by home and host HEI (14 NEOs out of 18, i.e. 78%, in the graph above). In cases of a two-stage process, final decision is normally taken by the host HEI in the Programme Country. There is no suggestion that this results from undue pressure by the host HEI (although three of the NEOs said that the host university, in some cases, prefers to carry out the selection procedure itself).

5.5 At the same time, some home HEIs in the Partner Countries prefer not to be wholly responsible for the final selection. This may reflect long-standing trust between home and host HEIs. It may be because selection by the host confers a particular prestige on the student. It may also be because the home HEI is concerned to avoid partiality or, in the words of one informant, corruption. The European Commission has indicated to the authors that it views joint selection positively, provided that it is based on good communication between partners and on clear agreement of the criteria to be used. These criteria should be set down in the IIA.

¹¹ Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2019, p. 272

5.6 The 34 National Agencies in the Programme Countries, while confirming that selection procedures vary considerably, have much the same perspective. Half of them reported that the usual method is one of selection conducted jointly by home and host institutions; with two responses allowed, 26% (9 NAs out of 34) indicated that joint selection culminates in a final decision by the host HEI. 47% of NAs (16 out of 34) said that selection is made in the home institution. 12% (five NAs) said that the selection method varies case by case. One NA mentioned the existence of a national set of ICM guidelines obliging project coordinators to work to the same selection criteria. Such a degree of conformity does not exist in all the Programme Countries. Case by case may be the norm even within project partnerships. Another NA pointed out that this may be the case even when host HEIs are bound by national guidelines: uniformity of practice is lost as soon as the Partner Country partners impose their own criteria. The comment by the Moldovan NEO in the table above, namely, that the use of inconsistent selection methods within the same project partnership can cause confusion, is echoed by two Programme Country IROs (in different countries), who report that variation in selection criteria presents problems of project implementation. A graphic summary of NA views is presented below:

Figure 8: Selection of incoming ICM students - the NAs' view (Source: survey of National Erasmus+ Agencies)



5.7 It is rare that any given country (Partner or Programme) will attempt to specify one single selection method; instead, the method is chosen at project level within each project partnership. A number of conclusions can be drawn:

- On the whole, selection processes in the home institution are transparent, based on open calls and clear criteria. Where this is not the case, NEOs tend to intervene with appropriate recommendations. The evidence suggests that they press for published and regulated procedures. References to appeals mechanisms and quality assurance are nevertheless extremely rare.
- What of the unselected applicants for ICM? The overall picture is varied. Some home HEIs keep records, some do not, while others do so at Faculty level, in which case the central administration may be unaware of them. Some receive due feedback from the host HEIs; some do not. Often the principal factor of non-selection is withdrawal for financial reasons, either by prior decision or subsequent to application; this effectively constitutes a record of the advantaged as well as of the disadvantaged. If the host HEI is particularly prestigious, rejection may simply be the result of intense competition.

5.8 How far do criteria other than academic performance and linguistic competence figure in the selection process? According to the Programme Guide, for 'students from Partner Countries, the first criterion for selecting students will be academic merit, but with equivalent academic level, preference should be assigned to students from less advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (including refugees, asylum seekers and migrants).'¹² The NEO reports reveal only patchy implementation:

Figure 9: Country-by-country overview of the selection process for ICM, derived from the NEO monitoring reports

region	country	YES¹³	NO	Comment
Western Balkans	Albania	9	nil	For 8 of the 9 HEIs, the NEO reported that 'no special measures were foreseen for the involvement of participants from socially disadvantaged groups.' The ninth cited 'background' as one of its selection criteria, but without explanation.
	Bosnia-Herzegovina	2	12	Most reports made no mention of disadvantaged students, even when HEIs had regulations which may or may not have been based on the ICM Handbook. One HEI included special needs among its selection criteria; another gave additional support (not defined) to special needs students and other categories of disadvantaged.
	Kosovo	1	7	One HEI was reported to place 'special emphasis on students that never travelled, women, special needs, students in rural areas'.
	Montenegro	nil	2	No mention of disadvantaged students.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The YES column indicates the number of reports that made reference to disadvantaged students; the NO column the number of reports that did not.

region	country	YES	NO	Comment
Eastern Partnership	Armenia	6	nil	There were no records of positive measures.
	Azerbaijan	nil	1	No mention of disadvantaged students.
	Belarus	nil	15	No mention of disadvantaged students.
	Georgia	3	3	One report noted that Georgia is a multicultural / multilingual country with number of ethnic minorities which constitute 80% of the population in some areas, a profile reflected in the student body. Another, in its selection procedure, gave additional weight to disadvantaged students ('national and/or religious minorities, low income and etc.'). Yet another said it would consider disadvantaged students in the future.
	Moldova	3	10	One HEI said that it was in a Gagauz-speaking (a dialect of Turkish) region; it taught sometimes in Gagauz but mainly in Russian. Another HEI supported students in 'vulnerable situations'. A third reported that its Psychology and Social Work departments had 'special programmes for disadvantaged students', but it was not clear if these included mobility.
	Ukraine	1	9	In one case, the NEO recommended that consideration be given to students who were 'socially and physically disabled'.

region	country	YES	NO	Comment
South- Mediterranean	Algeria	2	6	One HEI took gender balance into consideration; another had an office set up to assist disabled students.
	Egypt	5	nil	In all cases, the NEO reported no positive action.
	Israel	5	9	One HEI reported that it gave priority to disadvantaged students, all academic considerations being equal. Another listed its provisions for physically disabled students. Three HEIs noted that they considered 'social background' when selecting for mobility; one mentioned the Druze minority; another handled the issue by asking the student's family whether it approved the mobility.
	Jordan	4	18	One HEI reported consideration for special needs ('e.g. deaf students'). In the 2018 round, three HEIs said that they were taking measures to involve disadvantaged students.
	Lebanon	1	8	One HEI alluded to social status, but without clarification. Four HEIs gave outgoing students concessions on tuition fees, but these apparently applied to all students, not to disadvantaged students specifically.
	Morocco	4	3	In two cases the NEO reported good gender balance, but did not indicate whether this was the outcome of a targeted policy. One HEI gave consideration to financial need. Only one was stated categorically that it gave priority to disadvantaged students, citing cases of mobility by physically disabled students and a 62 percentage of mobile female students.
	Palestine	2	10	Two HEIs cited gender balance. PS presents as a special case; it argues that its HE system is structurally and geo-politically disadvantaged.
	Syria	1	6	In one case, the NEO noted that there was every possibility that the selection process was unfair to the financially disadvantaged.
	Tunisia	1	6	According to the NEO, one HEI has an equal opportunities policy.

5.9 After consideration of the interviews with NEOs, HEREs and Partner Country IROs, in conjunction with the survey results, it becomes apparent that:

- Selection criteria are mainly academic and linguistic. Other criteria include: interview with the selection committee; the year of study; in certain disciplines, a portfolio; the absence of prior mobility experience.
- Disadvantage is adopted as a selection criterion by some HEIs in the spirit of the Erasmus+ mission. Others leave it unaddressed, as it touches the nerve of stigmatisation, with the result that ICM applicants are reluctant to self-identify. (Sadly, one NEO declares that disadvantaged students 'are not that good academically' – an unwise generalisation.) Several interviewees report that disadvantaged students are less well prepared regarding their language abilities. Yet others say that HEIs are unaware of the need to consider the disadvantaged – because there is no mention of it in the IIA template. This, of course, is not the case. The European Commission points out that the emphasis on the principle of non-discrimination has always been a key element of the IIA. The template is designed to accommodate extra clauses, but Erasmus+ allows no scope for clauses to be excised. This suggests that many NEOs simply ignore the requirement to consider disadvantage, at least partly because of the lack of congruence between the Erasmus+ definition and particular national and legal cultures. Lack of awareness on the part of the NEOs is a possible explanation, one which is easily remedied.
- The NEOs' lack of focus on disadvantage differs little region from region. In the Eastern Partnership, 69% of NEO monitoring reports make no mention of disadvantage. In the South-Mediterranean, the figure is 75%. In the Western Balkans, 68%.
- This means that it is impossible to extrapolate any estimate of the numbers of disadvantaged students who are actually mobile. The NEO reports show that those in the category of the physically disabled – from the legal and administrative points of view by far the clearest category – number only a handful. Without a much tighter focus of investigation, the others remain invisible and therefore incalculable. There may well have been under-reporting during the period under scrutiny, given the wide definition of disadvantage and its low profile in the selection criteria. A sharper and more widely shared definition of disadvantage could minimise under-reporting, both of the disadvantaged who achieve mobility and those who refrain from applying or who opt out during the application process.
- There is no evidence of HE entry quotas (in countries which apply them) being carried forward into the ICM selection process.
- A majority of informants (made up mainly by 83% of the NEOs who answered an open-ended question in the online survey) nevertheless favour the setting of quotas for disadvantaged students in ICM. This is particularly the case of large project partnerships with large cohorts of mobile students. (For the view of the mobile students, see section 9 below.) Some NEOs would make this conditional on the home universities being able to demonstrate that they have a formal policy on inclusion. This would allow the relevant counselling services to participate in the selection process. Others prefer a return to the arrangements enshrined in Action 2 of the second ERASMUS MUNDUS Programme, which they regard as more effective than the current ICM requirements. These required partnerships to 'establish transparent conditions for the award of mobility grants, which pay due regard, inter alia, to gender and equity issues and linguistic abilities, and which

facilitate access in accordance with the principles of equal opportunities and non-discrimination¹⁴. In particular, they identified a Target Group III, containing vulnerable groups (refugees, asylum beneficiaries, victims of unjustified expulsion from university on racial, ethnic, religious, political, gender or sexual inclination, members of indigenous populations targeted by a specific national policy, and internally displaced persons).

- Quota-setting, however, clearly depends on agreed and legally operable definitions, as well as on the capacity of institutions and individuals to identify and self-identify.

5.10 What of the view from the Programme Countries? When asked whether they thought that disadvantaged students were given sufficient priority in the selection procedure, half of the NAs said that they did not know. 38% said that more could be done - indicating that in their view the prime responsibility for raising awareness, facilitating and implementing rests with the Partner Countries. Only a small minority consider that prioritisation is working as it should. This reflects the posture typically adopted by NAs: they raise awareness, they provide information, they encourage and counsel. When more active, they promote the exchange of good practice and provide training sessions. A small number note that their role is limited or still to be defined. Wherever they stand on the spectrum, they tend to devolve to the HEIs the responsibility for implementing Erasmus+ policy on disadvantage. Only one NA - the one with the national ICM guidelines mentioned earlier - positions itself in something resembling a regulatory role.

5.11 It is noteworthy that only one NA out of 34 raises the possibility of a return to ERASMUS MUNDUS Action 2, although IROs were more open to contemplating it. When asked directly about the effectiveness of quotas or targets for participation by disadvantaged students, a clear view nevertheless emerged. Twenty NAs were categorically negative on a number of grounds: quotas would be complicated to administer, particularly in view of the discontinuity of ICM funding; cohorts are already so small that applying quotas within them is not feasible; there is no guarantee that they would raise participation levels; given the difficulties of definition, they might well increase inequity. Eight NAs were favourable; the remainder were undecided.

¹⁴ Decision 1298/2008/EC, Official Journal L340/83, December 19 2008, Annex Action 2, para 2(f)

6. Organisational Support Funding (OS)

- OS only rarely reaches the Partner Countries and is very seldom used to facilitate mobility by the disadvantaged.
- Many NEOs are aware of this and register their dissatisfaction. The attitude of HEIs is varied: unaware, reticent, or grateful.
- NAs in the Programme Countries are typically non-interventionist; they regard the use of OS as the business of the project managers on the ground. None of them recommend the use of OS to support the mobility of the disadvantaged.

6.1 'The organisational support grant [OS] is a contribution to any cost incurred by the institutions in relation to activities in support of student and staff mobility, both inbound and outbound, to comply with the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education in Programme Countries, and with the **principles of the ECHE as reflected in the inter-institutional agreements agreed in the case of institutions from Partner Countries** [European Commission emphasis] ... [It] is calculated based on the number of all supported outbound and inbound mobility participants (including mobile participants with a zero-grant from EU funds for the entire mobility period).¹⁵ Moreover, beneficiaries may 'transfer up to 50% of the funds allocated for organisational support to individual support (including, from Call 2019 and if applicable, top-ups for students from disadvantaged backgrounds) and travel for student/staff mobility as well as special needs support'.¹⁶

6.2 Many respondents and interviewees are aware of the existence of OS funding (currently EUR 350 per mobility; it has been proposed to raise it in the next Programme). They are less aware that all or part of it can be used to assist the mobility of the disadvantaged. Indeed, only one monitoring report recommended that this be done. The table below gives an overview of the NEO reports. Considered along with the subsequent interviews, it is reasonable to conclude that:

- Receipt of OS monies by Partner Country HEIs is sporadic at best. When sums are allocated, they are small: one HEI cites a figure of EUR 50 per mobility, which is one seventh of the sum available. In the South-Mediterranean region OS income can be presumed to be zero. Only a minority of Programme Country HEIs make any allocations; Poland emerges as the most active in this respect. Some host countries, notably in Northern Europe, cover the visa costs of incoming students, but it is not clear whether this comes from Erasmus+ funding or from their own budgets.
- Some HEIs in Partner Countries request a share; others refrain, reluctant to put their participation at risk. Yet others are unaware that OS exists.

¹⁵ Key Action 107 (KA107) Guide for Applicants, version 23 January 2019, p.22

¹⁶ ICM Handbook, p.29

- In some Partner Country HEIs, such OS funding as arrives is retained by the central administration and does not reach the IRO. If it reaches the IRO, it may be used to subsidise office expenses, Erasmus+ promotional activities, or welcome receptions for incoming students. In one case, small sums of OS funding help to swell an endowment fund which supports mobility. In another, it is used to top up IRO salaries.
- One NEO declined to monitor OS distribution, saying that this is the job of the NAs in the Programme Countries. Much more common is the view that the sharing of OS should be covered in detail in the IIA¹⁷. This is also the view of the European Commission. In general, however, it appears that it does not happen.

6.3 The NEO monitoring reports, seen on a country-by-country basis, show how many mention OS and how many actually record any cases of sharing:

Figure 10: Country-by-country overview of OS distribution

region	country	mention of OS?		sharing of OS?		comment
		YES	NO	YES	NO	
Western Balkans	Albania	9	nil	1	8	For the majority of HEIs the NEO reported that ‘no organisational support funds were foreseen in the inter-institutional agreements signed [...], and no such funds were disbursed’.
	Bosnia-Herzegovina	14	nil	7	7	Seven HEIs reported that some Programme Country partners shared the OS funding. They cited HEIs in BE, DE, IE, RO, SK, TR. The most generous country was PL. The NEO concluded that OS was not routinely shared. It recommended insistently that this be remedied. Even in cases where OS was shared, there was no indication of whether it had been used to support disadvantaged students.
	Kosovo	4	4	1	3	In one isolated case, the host HEI (SK) allocated a share of the OS to the home HEI.
	Montenegro	nil	2	nil	nil	The NEO reports contained no mention of OS.

¹⁷ The current IIA template mentions only that ‘costs for insurance can be covered with the organisational support grants’.

region	country	mention of OS?		sharing of OS?		comment
		YES	NO	YES	NO	
Eastern Partnership	Armenia	6	nil	2	4	In two HEIs there were isolated cases of OS sharing – to subsidise travel expenses; the reports gave no indication of whether the funding had been used to support disadvantaged students. The best case was once again PL. The worst case was TR: in the absence of diplomatic relations, there can be no cross-border financial transfers.
	Azerbaijan	nil	nil	nil	nil	There was only one report submitted in the 2-3 year period. It had no relevant content.
	Belarus	11	4	10	1	Some OS sharing took place in 10 HEIs. According to the NEO, in six cases this had been lodged in the IIA.
	Georgia	4	2	3	1	OS sharing was rare. One HEI reported that only one of 37 partners obliged – it was Polish.
	Moldova	1	12	1	nil	The NEO observed that the sharing of OS was much too infrequent. It recommended more systematic distribution.
	Ukraine	3	7	1	2	Once again, sharing was non-existent or very rare. The NEO recommended more systematic distribution by Programme Country HEIs. It counselled efforts to include OS distribution in the IIA.

region	country	mention of OS?		sharing of OS?		comment
		YES	NO	YES	NO	
South-Mediterranean	Algeria	1	7	nil	1	The issue of OS either was not addressed or was not deemed useful to mention in the reports.
	Egypt	5	nil	nil	5	The NEO reported that it was unclear whether OS was included in the IIA; Programme Country HEIs made no offers.
	Israel	8	6	nil	8	There was no sharing of OS. One report records that OS had been requested and refused. The NEO repeatedly recommended that the EU enforce the distribution of OS funding.
	Jordan	3	19	nil	3	There was no sharing of OS. The NEO made no relevant recommendations.
	Lebanon	2	7	nil	2	There was no sharing of OS. The NEO recommended that the situation be remedied.
	Morocco	5	2	nil	5	There was no sharing of OS. The NEO recommended that the situation be remedied.
	Palestine	nil	12	nil	nil	The issue of OS either was not addressed or was not deemed useful to mention in the reports.
	Syria	nil	6	nil	nil	The issue of OS either was not addressed or was not deemed useful to mention in the reports.
Tunisia	1	6	nil	1	There was no sharing of OS. The NEO recommended that the situation be remedied.	

6.4 When surveyed online, the Programme Country NAs offered a contrasting perspective. Out of 34 NAs responding, 24 (71%) said that they ‘systematically advise [...] on a general basis’ that the coordinating HEI in each project partnership distribute the OS monies. Five said that they do not do this; the remaining five do so only in response to enquiries from the HEIs. There is a strong consensus among NAs that the management of OS funding is devolved to the project partnership and to the coordinating HEI in particular. Their expectation is that partnerships will agree,

explicitly and in advance, how OS will be distributed. The Polish NA adds that the agreed shares should be fully documented in the final project report.

6.5 What, then, do NAs typically advise? Eight simply reiterate in general terms the principle set down in the Guide for Applicants quoted above. Seven recommend that OS sharing be organised on the basis of volume of workload. Four give suggestions relating to visa and travel costs. One mentions staff training. Asked whether they recommend that OS be used to support disadvantaged students, none replied in the affirmative, although some conceded that it would be a good idea. The authors of this study did not ask directly what ought to be the case. The evidence from the comments made by NAs is that their views would be divided, some believing that the Programme Guide should be much more prescriptive, others holding to the principle that the distribution of OS is a key element of project management and should be devolved to the partners. The latter view is the more strongly held. It would still be tenable if the Programme Guide were to focus more emphatically on the possible use of OS funding to support the disadvantaged. The 2019 Guide (pp.43-44) gives indicative suggestions of what expenses might be covered by the OS funding. It makes no mention of disadvantaged students, who are addressed only implicitly by the requirement that OS be used in line with the principles of the ECHE reflected in the IIAs.

6.6 When the authors interviewed five IROs from three Programme Countries, it found the range of practice that the principle of devolution suggests: OS is shared or not, according to the decision of the project partnership, or of the coordinating HEI. In one case, it was shared with certain partners but not with those from 'well developed' countries.

7. Obstacles to ICM mobility from the Partner Countries – in general and for disadvantaged students in particular

- Financial and logistic obstacles predominate; communications and administrative difficulties also feature.
- The lack of prioritisation of disadvantaged students in selection criteria also plays a major role.
- Improved communication between NAs and NEOs is a precondition of a productive approach to tackling the obstacles.

If the definition of disadvantage by the Partner Countries is nationally context-dependent, does it follow that there will be no uniformity in their perception of the obstacles to mobility?

7.1 A number of obstacles have been touched on in the previous sections. In general, they are financial and logistic. For the disadvantaged, they are compounded by problems of definition and identification. Perhaps the greatest obstacles to mobility by the disadvantaged are the cultural and psychological forces which disincline them even to apply. One informant represents ICM mobility as an 'ivory tower' to which the disadvantaged have no access. Another speaks of 'self-de-selection'.

7.2 NEOs were asked to name the obstacles that, in their country, were first, second and third in importance. The obstacles are ranked in two ways:

- *ranked as first obstacle* - by how many NEOs nominated a given obstacle as the first in importance

- *ranked by total of mentions* - by the number of times a particular obstacle was identified, with whatever degree of importance

7.3 Figure 11: NEOs' ranking of main obstacles for student participation in ICM

Number of NEOs ranking an obstacle as first, second or third in importance			
	First main obstacle	Second main obstacle	Third main obstacle
The selection criteria established by the project partnership do not prioritise disadvantaged students	4	0	0
Students need to advance initial costs (e.g. for travel, insurance, etc.)	3	5	2
Delays with payments by the host university (for students who covered initial costs from own budget or for the monthly instalments of the grant)	3	3	2
Language requirements	3	2	2
Visa application process	2	3	2
Insufficient funding	2	1	0
Many disadvantaged students do not really consider international mobility	1	3	1
There are few scholarships/grants available	1	0	3
Lack of information on and visibility of the Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility scheme	0	1	1
Absence of family support/permission	0	1	1
Minimum duration of the mobility (minimum 3 months for studies and 2 months for traineeships) is too long	0	0	2

7.4 Figure 12: Total number of times a specific obstacle was cited by the NEOs

Total number of times a specific obstacle was cited by the NEOs	
Students need to advance initial costs (e.g. for travel, insurance, etc.)	10
Delays with payments by the host university (for students who covered initial costs from own budget or for the monthly instalments of the grant)	8
Language requirements	7
Visa application process	7
Many disadvantaged students do not really consider international mobility	5
There are few scholarships/grants available	4
The selection criteria established by the project partnership do not prioritise disadvantaged students	4
Insufficient funding	3
Lack of information on and visibility of the Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility scheme	2
Absence of family support/permission	2
Minimum duration of the mobility (minimum 3 months for studies and 2 months for traineeships) is too long	2

7.5 In both perspectives, the financial considerations weigh heavily (i.e. the need to advance costs and the delays in payment). The essential difference is that, in the ranking by first obstacle, it is an impediment specific to the disadvantaged that ranks the highest (i.e. the lack of prioritisation in the selection process). This obstacle is significant, suggesting departure from the requirements laid down in the Programme Guide, even taking into account the fact that disadvantaged students should be considered for selection only when displaying 'equal merit'. The ranking by total, on the other hand, gives the greatest importance to obstacles that can be presumed to confront the majority of intending mobile students, and not only the 'officially' disadvantaged.

7.6 The NEO survey information is amplified in the follow-up interviews. Together, they detail obstacles which, in particular cases, have a cumulative effect:

- While the actual grant amounts are regarded as adequate, the specific difficulties cited by the NEOs are clearly substantial. Students are frequently required to cover, in advance and from their own funds, visa, travel and insurance costs. It is not uncommon for host HEIs to delay the transfer of funds, although it is not clear whether this is by choice or by virtue of some *force majeure*, such as the impracticality of making a bank transfer to the home country, where the student may not have an account, while waiting for an account to be opened in the host country. Either way, it obliges the mobile student to commit to up-front self-funding. Not all of these expenses are subsequently reimbursable. Moreover, some host HEIs require advance payment of accommodation costs; others demand evidence of accessible emergency funds to values of up to EUR 1000. The ICM alumni agree that the financial obstacles can be substantial (see section 9 below.)

- Coordinating institutions in the Programme Countries do not always inform their partners of the success of their application to Erasmus+. Instances are reported in which home HEIs are unaware of their membership of Erasmus+ project partnerships until informed at the last minute on the success of the application. The European Commission has now incorporated into the project application process an automatic notification to Partner Country participants. Yet even prompt notification following project selection in July proves very late for some partner HEIs. The asynchrony of academic calendars means that members of outgoing cohorts may have quite different constraints.
- The obstacle ranked third by the NEOs is the low number of scholarships and grants from sources beyond Erasmus+. Scholarship programmes, whether national or institutional, typically prioritise academic merit; if they take disadvantage into consideration, it is likely to refer only to financial hardship, rather than to the full range of disadvantage envisaged in Erasmus+.
- Securing a study visa presents problems which are widespread. For some countries, students are obliged to travel abroad to the nearest consular office, for example to Amman, Ankara, Baku, Bucharest, Ljubljana, Moscow, Skopje, Tbilisi or Tirana, depending on their country of departure. Travel to these destinations for visa issue and collection is expensive and non-reimbursable. Several NEOs cite the indicative figure of EUR 1000, which disqualifies candidates for whom such a sum is out of reach. For a physically disabled student who needs to be accompanied, the figure doubles. In all the interviews, only one country is said to provide online visa application and issue facilities – Sweden. All others require application in person, for face-to-face interview, for examination of documentation, finger-printing, and so on.
- To this difficulty is added those of visas delivered by outsourced providers operating on a commercial basis (particularly in the South-Mediterranean, where the waiting lists for appointments are long) and those issued by consulates which allow entry for only three months. Intending Palestinian mobile students on the West Bank are required to give six months' notice before proceeding to Amman. Those in Gaza need, in addition, permission to cross Israel. Some Arab students in Jerusalem have no right to passports and depend on *laissez-passer* issued by government; these tend not to be recognised by foreign consular authorities.
- Family approval is often needed, particularly for female students. But this is not uniformly the case. Many Partner Countries have high levels of female participation and regard the difficulties as sub-cultural rather than cultural.
- A number of NEOs note that they have only limited access to the Erasmus+ Mobility Tool, which hampers their activities. IROs, for their part, complain that they have no direct access to the Mobility Tool and depend for access on the goodwill of project partners in the Programme Countries, which can imply laborious manual processing of data.
- Other NEOs regard the Distance Calculator as insufficiently fit for purpose, there being no mechanical relationship between distance, itinerary, number of flight segments, and ticket price.
- The principal academic obstacle is lack of foreign language competence. Students who are speakers of minority languages in their own countries may experience added difficulty. Having received tuition in the official language, they may have inadequate time and resources to acquire the language of course delivery in the host institution.

- The NEO monitoring reports make occasional reference to problems with learning agreements and recognition of credits. At first sight, these are not in themselves obstacles to mobility, since they will be encountered only by students who are already mobile. On the other hand, if they constitute chronic problems within particular project partnerships, they will discourage future cohorts. Fortunately, the authors have found no evidence that such problems are long-term.

7.7 What of the perceptions of the obstacles from the vantage point of the Programme Countries? In general, they are in line with those of the Partner Countries. NAs believe that NEOs and home HEIs should press for increased funding, put more effort into promotion and awareness raising, and adjust their selection criteria to widen access to mobility. For their part, NAs and host HEIs appear ready to do likewise, as well as providing comprehensive support services, ensuring that opportunities for the disadvantaged are prominent in the IIAs, and accelerating payments to beneficiaries.

7.8 NAs are nevertheless hesitant about top up awards, as the next section of this report shows. They are also opposed to the setting of quotas or targets for the inclusion of disadvantaged students (as noted in para.5.11 above).

7.9 It is worth recording that 26 of the 34 NAs receive the relevant monitoring reports from the NEOs. When asked if they have acted on NEOs' recommendations, nine say that they have not. Many refer the reports to the coordinating HEIs, on the assumption that the relevant action is to be taken at project level.

7.10 While the NAs' responses to the survey are not detailed, it emerges fairly clearly that unmediated NA-NEO dialogue is, if not rare, at least not routine. If in the future NEOs come to make specific recommendations regarding disadvantaged students - in ways that impact on the content of IIAs - an enhanced framework for NA-NEO communication and debate will give their proposals a greater chance of discussion and adoption.

8. Top up funding for disadvantaged students

- Programme Countries are reluctant to commit to adopting top up measures for disadvantaged students.
- They worry about funding, which is insufficient and unpredictable year-on-year, and inconsistent definitions of disadvantage.

8.1 Distinct from the OS funding and the supplementary financial assistance given to students with special needs is the possibility of top up grants. Programme Countries are now free to opt in to making top up awards of between EUR 100 and 200 per month to disadvantaged students from Partner Countries. Judging by the survey of NAs, their attitude is, to say the least, cautious. Only nine of the 34 (26%) said that they would offer top ups; the remainder said that they would not¹⁸. This is despite the fact that 28 of the 34 already offer top ups within KA103 (intra-European mobility). Why the discrepancy? Partly, it is due to the fact that, beyond what is entered on the Mobility Tool, NAs have little sense of whether KA103 top ups have been effective in raising the level of mobility among the disadvantaged.

8.2 NAs' reservations regarding top ups for KA107 are based on two factors: first, the difficulty in identifying eligible beneficiaries; secondly, the availability of funding, given that the discretionary top ups have to be found from within the existing national Erasmus+ allocations. These two factors taken together give NAs the strong sense that, if they were to offer top ups, they would be unable to guarantee equitable treatment. Unsurprisingly, 14 of the 34 NAs declare themselves unsure of whether top ups for disadvantaged students would be effective. It is possible that they could be persuaded by the appearance of new money and by a precise and reliable methodology for defining disadvantage and addressing it systematically.

¹⁸ In the event, only seven Programme Countries are offering top-ups in the 2019 call: Cyprus, Germany, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta and the UK.

8.3 The Commission's decision to allow Programme Countries to opt in is already at risk of instituting inequity. Germany, for example, restricts top up awards to students with children and to students with minor disabilities as defined in German law; all other categories of disadvantage are ineligible. Spain, by contrast, has not opted in. Where the top up facility exists, due documentation typically favours outgoing over incoming students. It also means that a disadvantaged student from a Partner Country is more likely to contemplate mobility to those Programme Countries which, because they are wealthier, have resources available for topping up. This could in principle also happen when Programme HEIs experience unexpectedly lower demand from outgoing students, but it would require reporting mechanisms allowing news of availability to reach the NEOs and thence to the Partner HEIs. While the resulting competition for top up grants may raise the number of mobile disadvantaged students, it may also skew the selection procedures at project level.

8.4 The current measure is no doubt a transitional one, intended to give a guide to future Programme design. Partial remedies can come with the increased resources which the Commission is seeking for the next generation of Erasmus+. But the fundamental problem persists: monitoring the efficacy of top ups cannot be reliable as long as the definition of disadvantage is insecure.

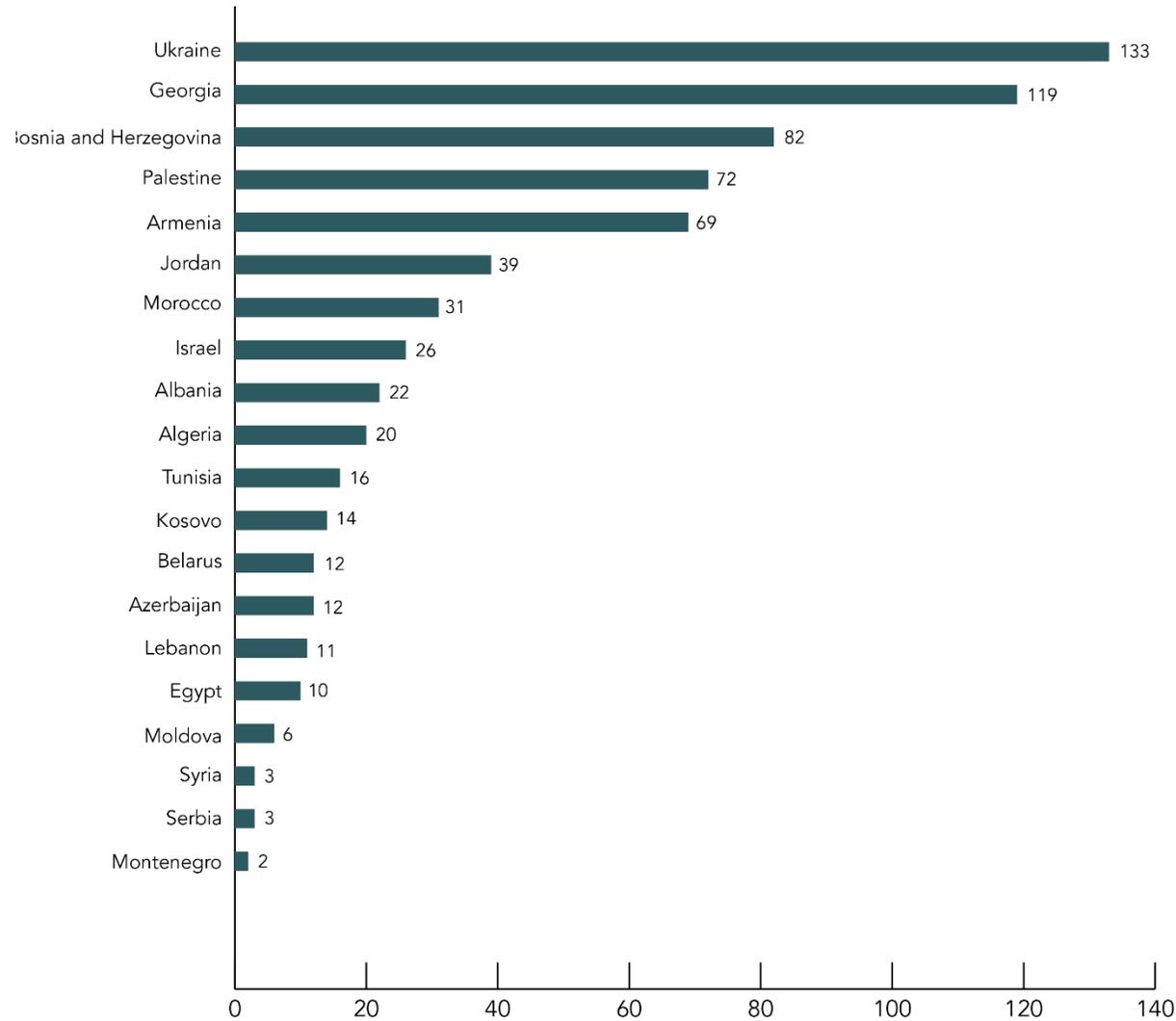
9. ICM and disadvantage: the student perspective

- Over 700 ICM alumni and currently mobile students from nineteen Partner Countries (and Serbia, a Partner Country until its recent designation as a Programme Country) contributed responses to the online survey.
- Although the vast majority were satisfied with their mobility experience, one third had been obliged to find additional funding; one third also had encountered problems with their application for visa.
- The need to self-fund certain initial costs (visa, travel, insurance) was a particularly widespread difficulty.
- They considered that socio-economic and financial factors, as well as physical disability, were major obstacles to mobility, but they were unable to indicate that selection processes had addressed the full spectrum of disadvantage.
- A majority considered that self-identification was feasible, but were less confident when asked if they themselves would self-identify.
- A majority also considered that the problems of the disadvantaged could be resolved by more intensive dissemination of the opportunities and by higher levels of funding to support a greater number of individual grants.
- Only a minority was sensitive to the issues of definition. It regarded these as first and foremost a national matter.

Earlier sections of this report demonstrate that Partner and Programme countries need, and sometimes seek, a higher level of operational consensus, particularly in respect of the definition of disadvantage, the use of OS and the desirability of top up grants. Certainly, respondents and interviewees consistently declare their support for widening participation in ICM, as well as for reinforcing its user-friendliness. The view of the providing authorities and HEIs, however, can only be partial. The authors therefore canvassed the opinions of as many of the direct beneficiaries as it could – Partner Country students with recent experience of Erasmus+ mobility. What was their background? What obstacles did they encounter? How were they selected and supported? Was any provision made for disadvantaged students and what facilities existed for identifying them? How accessible was ICM for students from their country and what did they recommend in the way of improvements?

9.1 The online survey of recently mobile Partner Country students garnered 702 responses: 120 from the four Western Balkan countries; 351 from the Eastern Partnership; 228 from all the South-Mediterranean countries with the exception of Libya. In addition, three responses were received from Serbian students. The country-by-country breakdown is shown below. There is no obvious explanation for the wide range in the number of responses. Suffice it to say that the total number of 702 yields data which is sufficiently rich to complement the opinions of NEOs, NAs and HEIs and to give validity to this report's conclusions. It is important to note, however, that the respondents were self-selected and therefore a random sample.

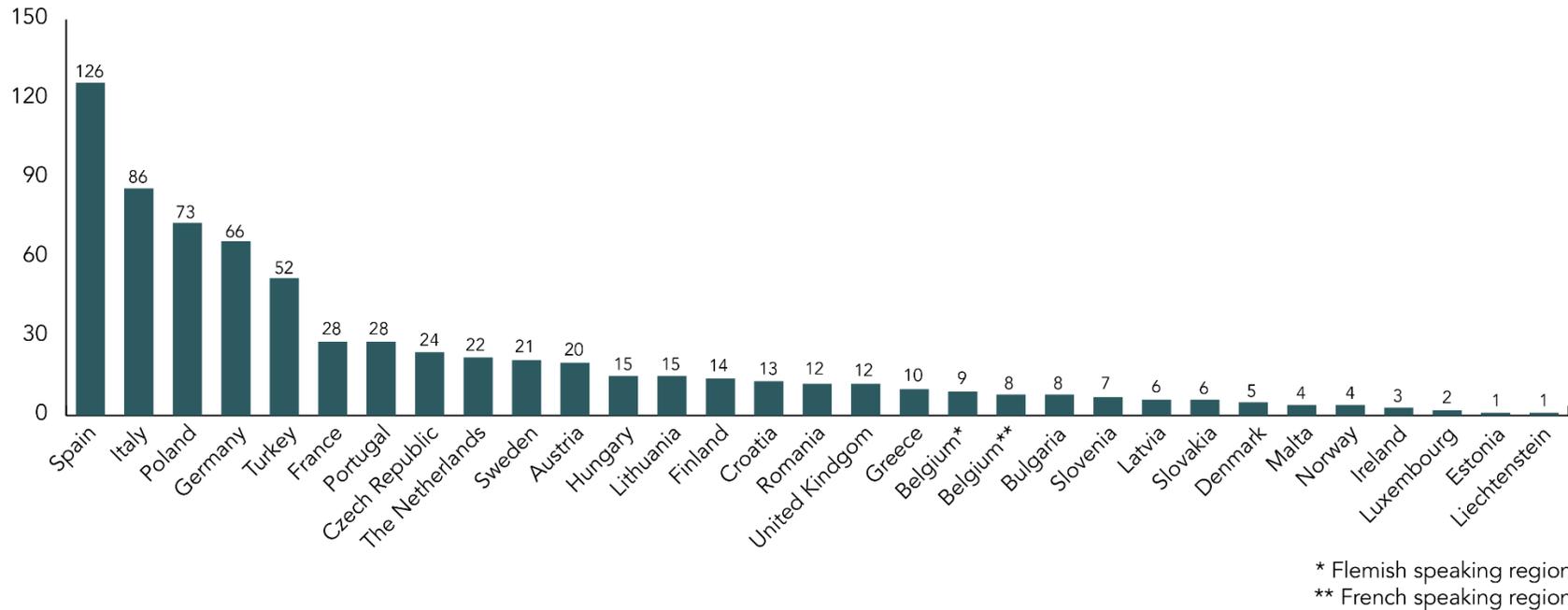
Figure 13: Country of home higher education institution (Source: student survey)



9.2 Approximately two thirds of respondents (452) were female. Of the total number of 702, 28% came from families with no background in higher education. For the vast majority - 80% - their period of study abroad had been their first. They were therefore particularly sensitive to the detail of its organisation. They were not, however, equally distributed between Programme Countries. Here, too, there is wide discrepancy, with

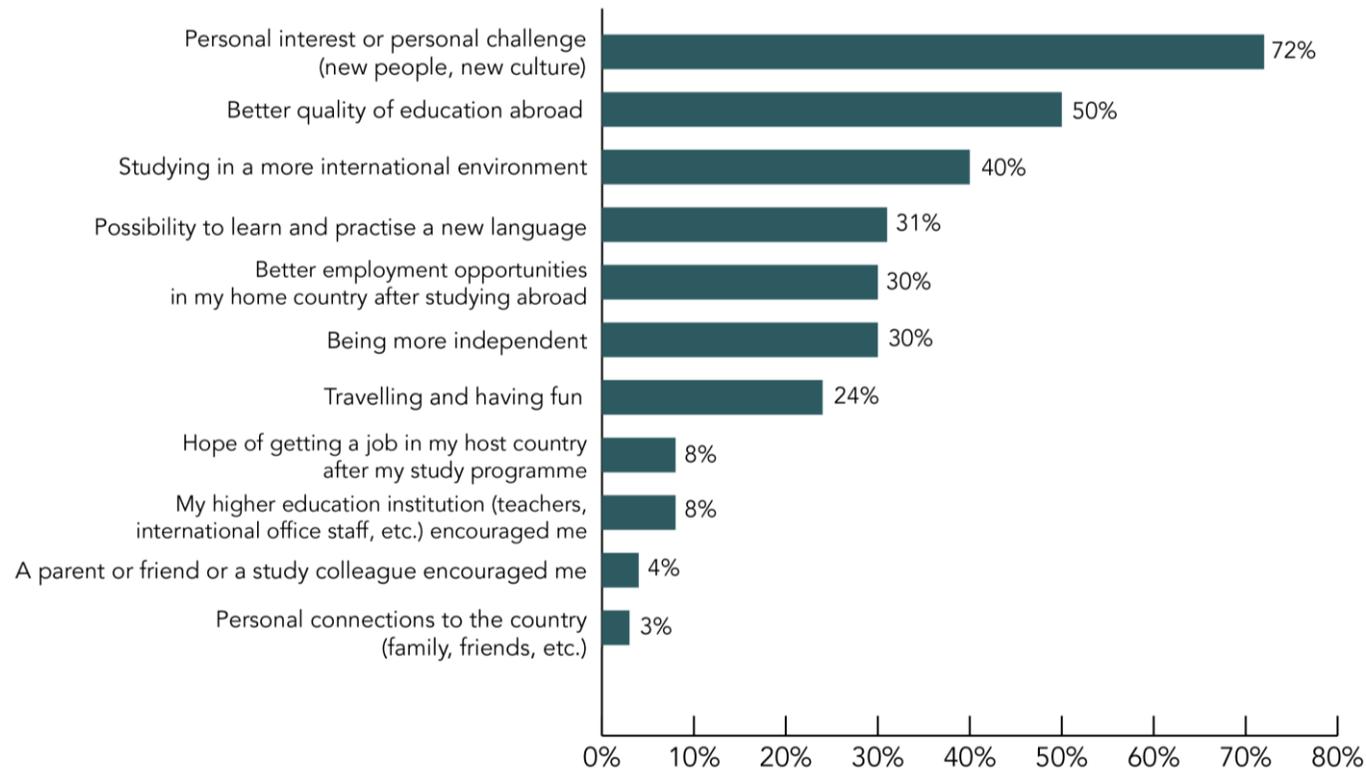
18% going to a single host country, Spain, a factor which might have skewed the collective perception. The host countries are shown in the graphic below:

Figure 14: Host countries (Source: student survey)



9.3 When asked why they had opted to study abroad, purely personal motivations predominated. Seventy-two per cent cited, among their three main reasons, the desire to meet the challenge of a new culture. The number is boosted by those who gave related reasons, such as 'being more independent' and 'travelling and having fun'. Fifty per cent also said that, among their three prime considerations, was the 'better quality of education abroad' or the opportunity to study in a more international environment (40%). Relatively few (8%), on the other hand, said that their home institution had encouraged them in this respect. Thirty per cent considered that their employment opportunities at home would be enhanced, but only 8% entertained the possibility of finding work in the host country. The number citing the existence of family connections in the host country was minimal (3%). Open-ended answers suggest that the students' expectations were overwhelmingly met: 92% would go on another ICM placement if they could; 97% would recommend the experience to their friends. Many responses were euphoric. Many were, even with reservations, satisfied and grateful. Their motivations are shown below:

Figure 15: Reasons for deciding to study abroad (Source: student survey)



9.4 A substantial number of students reported the existence of relevant counselling at the home institution (43%) and at the host institution (69%). In addition, information days and/or orientation weeks were logged by 54% (at home HEI) and by 59% (at host HEI). Language tuition was available at home, according to 6% of respondents, but principally abroad (44%). The survey invited supplementary comments, the majority of which suggested that relevant advice was given whenever it was sought. Even so, it is disappointing to note that 151 students (22%) received no pre-departure support from their home HEI, while 18 (3%) received no support on arrival. All these figures fall a long way short of the 100% to which mobile students may believe they have a right. Ideally, the support given by home and host HEIs would have been complementary and planned in advance within the framework of each project partnership. Of course, the students would not have been familiar with the detail of the IIAs.

9.5 For just over one third of the students, additional financial support was necessary. Of these, 75% secured it from family or friends, while 34% self-funded from savings or earnings, the overlap representing those who managed to tap both sources. The remaining 11% succeeded in obtaining assistance from either home or host HEIs. By contrast two thirds of the total number of respondents said that the Erasmus+ grant was sufficient.

9.6 Notwithstanding the pastoral care and the additional financial support, the students came up against numerous obstacles. Many of these were financial. When students were asked to name the three most serious obstacles, 53% complained that they had been obliged to cover the initial costs of the period abroad (i.e. travel, visa and insurance) themselves. The visa application process itself proved problematic for 35% of the students (cf. para.7.2 above). 27% reported that the host HEI had delayed the release of the grant, while 23% said that the grant in any case was insufficient. These difficulties were exacerbated by the requirement that they open a bank account, particularly in Programme Countries where it is contingent on first securing a residence permit. The online survey offered respondents the chance to add open-ended comments. These tended to reinforce the box-ticking. One student, however, reported that s/he was obliged - in breach of the Programme rules - to pay EUR 500 'to win the Erasmus+ scholarship'.

9.7 There were also other obstacles. First in importance was the shortfall in available mobilities (33%), followed by the difficulty in finding accommodation in the host country (27%), and the lack of information about the mobility opportunities (26%). Less frequent were mentions of language difficulties (16%) and problems confronting students who were parents of children (9%). Only 4% thought that the minimum duration of the mobility is too long.

9.8 By and large, the students' identification of obstacles tallies with the results of the survey of NEOs set out in section 7 above. The difference is that the NEOs were asked specifically about the obstacles confronting disadvantaged students. They found that, in addition to the self-funding of initial costs, a major impediment lay in the fact that the selection criteria used by project partnerships failed to give sufficient - or any - priority to the disadvantaged. The online survey of students framed the issue in a different way. It did not ask whether respondents were considered - by themselves or by national or educational authorities - to be disadvantaged. To invite self-identification in the survey would, for several reasons, have brought difficulties of interpretation:

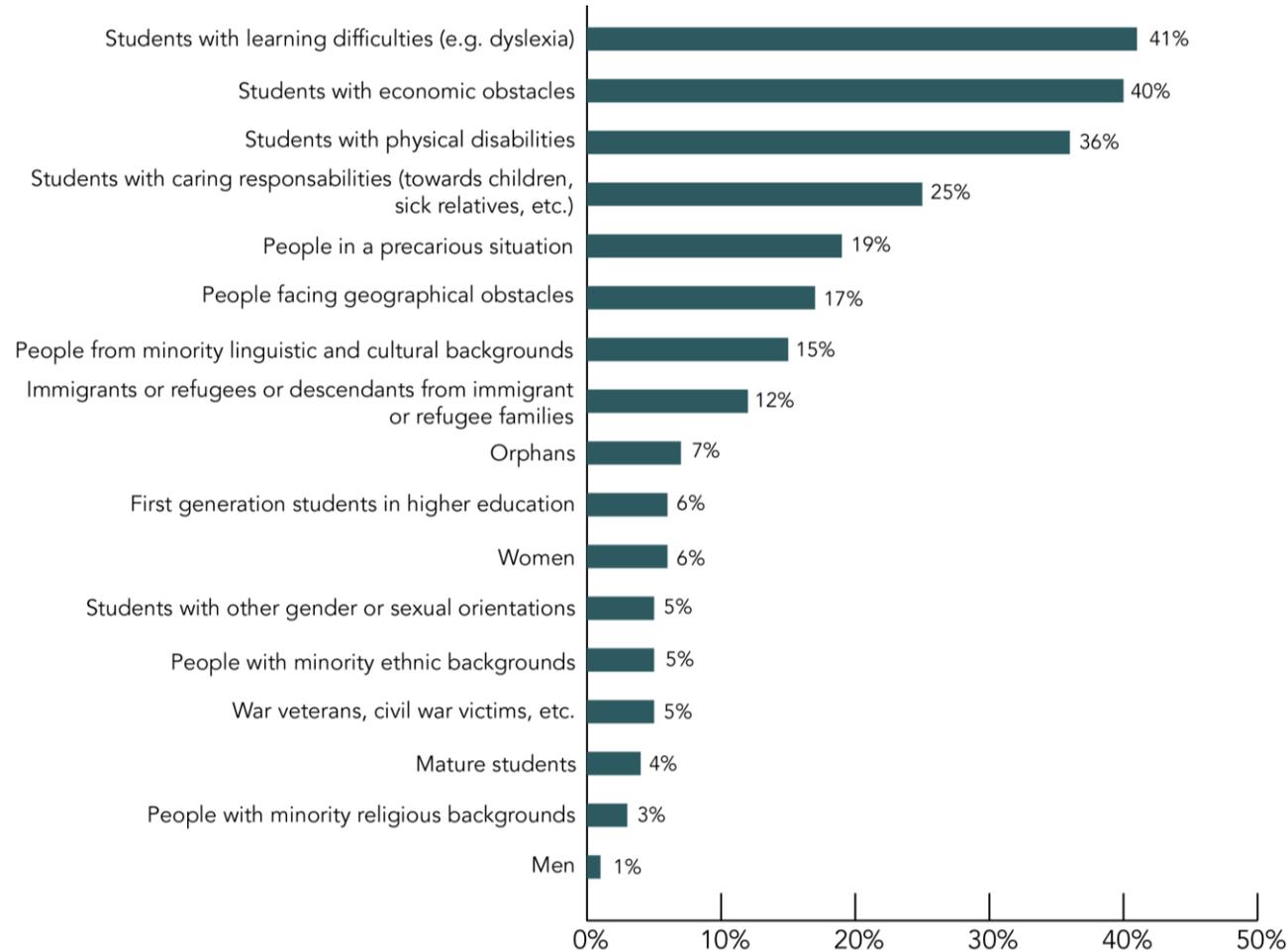
- Self-identification might have fallen outside the relevant legal definitions in the Partner Country concerned.
- It would not indicate whether the mobility had been granted because of, or in spite of, the selection criteria.
- It would have required sets of detailed follow-up questions on the provision of dedicated counselling, pastoral and academic care, physical infrastructure, additional costs, and so on.
- It might have been merely retrospective, i.e. not made prior to the application for mobility.

Instead, the authors asked the students about the extent to which disadvantage (however defined) featured in the selection process. It asked about the national definition and the documentation normally required. Would self-identification be a viable procedure? What measures might be taken to increase participation by disadvantaged students? The following paragraphs report the responses in detail.

9.9 Thirty-seven per cent of respondents said that they had been selected by their home institution, in contrast to the 11% selected by the host. In line with para.5.3 above, 43% reported the existence of a joint selection procedure. When asked if the procedures, at any stage, included an opportunity to declare a disadvantage, 12% said 'yes', 39% said 'no', and 49% could not recall. Of the many who were unable to remember, it is likely that they felt completely unconcerned. Forty students took the opportunity to recall specifics. Most of these refer to physical disability; only a small minority mention socio-economic status. Only 4% of respondents could cite instances of students being required to submit documentation proving any form of disadvantage.

9.10 A further question, drawing on the Erasmus+ indicative definition, asked which categories of students would have difficulty in participating in ICM. Their suppositions differ substantially from what they recall of the selection criteria, notably in the extent to which economic disadvantage are prominent. Their answers are displayed in the graphic below:

Figure 16: Categories of students who would have difficulties with participating in ICM (Source: student survey)

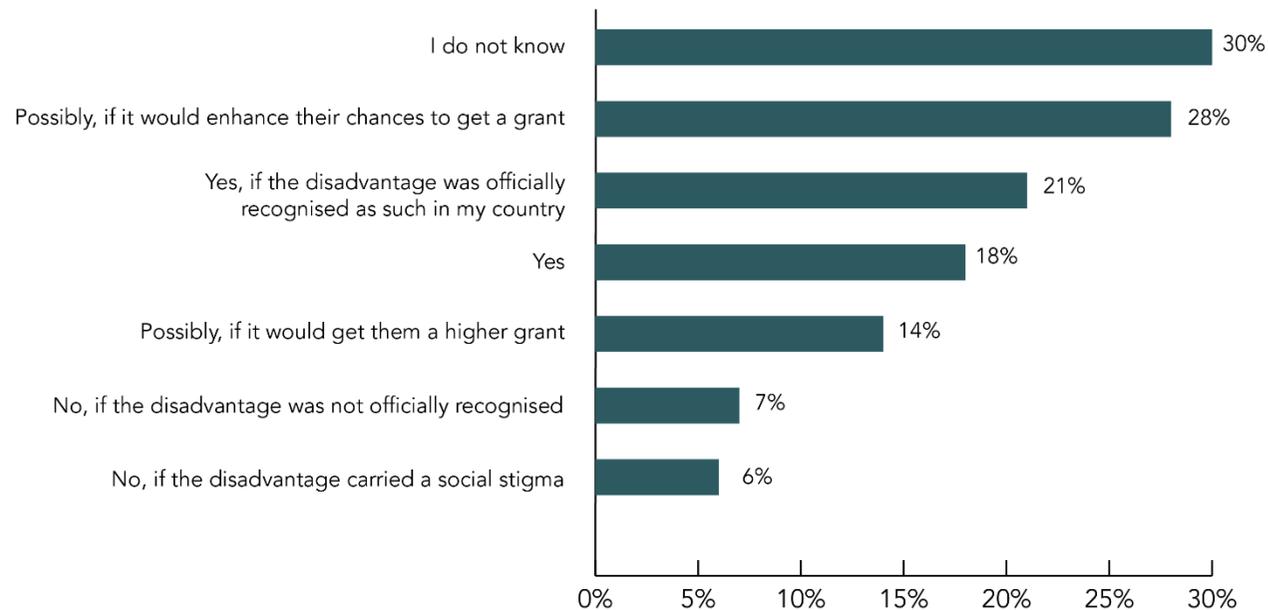


The question allowed multiple box-ticking. The answers have also to be set alongside the responses to another question: how far do you agree that in your country all students (including the disadvantaged) 'have the possibility to participate in Erasmus+ ICM'? Thirty-three per cent strongly agreed; 36% agreed; 18% neither agreed nor disagreed; only 13% disagreed. It is difficult to interpret this surprisingly high level of optimism other than by surmise: the respondents are, in their vast majority 'non-disadvantaged' (and therefore advantaged) and include the many

designated above as ‘unconcerned’; in addition – and obviously – some Partner Countries are more committed to increasing accessibility than others.

9.11 The students were then asked: ‘do you think that disadvantaged students would self-identify at the application stage?’ Multiple answers were possible. Thirty per cent did not know. Eighteen per cent gave a categorical ‘yes’. Forty-two per cent said ‘yes, if self-identification were to drive up their chances of a grant or a higher grant’. Twenty-one per cent made the response conditional on whether the disability was officially recognised in the jurisdiction concerned. Only 6% said ‘no, if the disadvantage carried a social stigma’. In summary, 36% of respondents were categorically negative or non-committal; 64% were categorically or conditionally positive.

Figure 17: ‘If asked, do you think students applying for an ICM grant would indicate that they are disadvantaged?’ (Source: student survey)



9.12 The balance shifted slightly when students were asked if they themselves would self-identify if they felt disadvantaged. Here, caution and uncertainty become more apparent: 35% said ‘maybe’ and 25% did not know. Twenty-eight per cent said ‘yes’; only 11 per cent said ‘no’.

9.13 It is reasonably clear that efforts to raise the willingness to self-identify would be subject to two pre-conditions: national legislations would have to be much more closely aligned to the Erasmus+ indicative definition of disadvantage; measures would have to be implemented in such a

way as to exclude all possibility of stigmatisation. The students' responses to these questions amply illustrate the magnitude of such a challenge. Widening access to the Programme presupposes cultural shifts in Partner Countries which are powerful enough to make effective legislation feasible.

9.14 Finally, when asked how to include opportunities for the full spectrum of the disadvantaged, what measures did the students suggest? Just under half of the respondents (47%) used the open-ended answer facility to give their views. It is not possible to quantify accurately the content of their responses. Some made multiple suggestions, either discrete or with the indication that they should be implemented in combination. Broadly speaking, there were three large sets of proposals, each made by between 50 and 100 students:

- Those which stressed the need for **enhanced publicity**. This typically meant promotion by the European Commission, but more specifically by the home HEI. It was felt by many that promotional efforts could be **better targeted**: customised for particular categories or communities of the disadvantaged, for example small regional universities, as well as delivered in minority languages. Parents, particularly those with no higher education background, should be much better informed of the opportunities available to their children. Publicity was also taken to mean counselling and support for disadvantaged students within the home HEI. If the disadvantaged only knew and were helped to know, it was felt, participation would rise.
- Many responses related predictably to **funding for students**. Higher grants for all, higher grants for the disadvantaged, dedicated assistance for visa and travel expenses, bespoke budgets for each disadvantaged person – these proposals all featured. Most frequent was the plea for timely, even pre-departure, release of at least an initial instalment of the grant. These comments echo and reinforce the observations of NEOs recorded in section 7 above. Additional financial support for students may well, of course, imply higher administrative costs.
- The third large group of responses sheds little light on the issue at hand. They are best categorised as 'don't knows'; either they are non-committal or unfocused, too general to be helpful.

9.15 An intermediate group of between 10 and 50 respondents drew attention to the **selection procedures**. They tended to fall into two overlapping sub-sets. There were those who focused on the criteria – the majority maintaining that, all other things being equal (i.e. academic performance, language competence) the disadvantaged should be prioritised, with a small minority arguing for setting the bar lower. More prominent was the sub-set which was preoccupied with the transparency and reliability of the selection process. Some wanted the Commission to be represented on the selection panel; others thought it best to eliminate the home HEI entirely and to institute a system of direct application to the host HEI. One student, concerned less with questioning the probity of the home HEI and more with advancing the cause of the disadvantaged, suggested that an Erasmus+ alumna/us, with hands-on experience of the challenges of foreign placements, should sit on each selection panel.

9.16 Lastly, there were proposals logged by groups of fewer than 10 students.

- More extensive English language provision, the lack of English being regarded as an accurate marker of disadvantage.
- The setting of quotas for disadvantaged students, while acknowledging that this required prior agreement on definition.
- Other measures proposed were: promotion and strengthening of buddy and mentoring systems; organisation of focus groups, presumably at national level, to determine the best ways forward; wider use of internships; participation of a greater number of HEIs.

A small group of students saw no need for action, believing either that all was well, since in principle Erasmus+ is open to all, or - more assertively - that no favours should be given to any category of applicant.

9.17 It is worth noting that in the total set of 329 contributions only one student actually self-identified as disadvantaged (an internally displaced person). It is worth quoting, too, the words of one respondent: 'for me first steps need to be taken at national level and only after this it will be possible to help such students regarding the International mobility.' Taking these two points in conjunction with the proposal to run focus groups, a tentative conclusion emerges. Given that the core of the problem lies in the non-alignment of Erasmus+ and Partner Country definitions of disadvantage, national forums - sponsored by the European Commission - could be set up to examine all the relevant issues, perhaps on the basis of this report. They would perforce engage with the comments of NEOs listed in paragraph 5.9 above, including the desire, expressed by more than a few, of a return to the methodology of Action 2 of ERASMUS MUNDUS II. This is not to obscure the fact that in the Programme Countries, the definition of disadvantage is problematic and that, here too, there is a need to focus attention.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

- **The focus on disadvantaged students in ICM is much weaker than that intended by the Programme Guide.** This is clearly the case in Partner Countries, where legal frameworks and cultural value systems do not necessarily accord with those of the EU. Although the attitudes of Programme Countries were not surveyed so comprehensively, they reveal a similar situation, largely because the policy issues relating to disadvantage fall within the competence of the Member State, rather than the EU. The survey responses of ICM alumni and currently mobile students confirm that the Programme Guide, far from being regulatory, is in practice merely aspirational.
- **Legal definitions of disadvantage in the Partner Countries vary**, as do their application to and implementation in the higher education systems. In very few countries do they approximately correspond to the detailed indicative definitions set out in the Programme Guide. Georgia and Israel appear to be the countries where policies on disadvantage are best aligned with Erasmus+. However, this may not be the complete picture: it should be remembered that the authors cannot affirm the reliability of informants' identification of legislative instruments (particularly those unavailable in English).
- **Where affirmative action exists, it is generally at the point of entry into the HE system**; there is little to no evidence of such action being carried forward into the process of selection for ICM. Some informants – in the Partner Countries rather than in the Programme Countries – favour instituting quotas for disadvantaged students in ICM. It may well be possible for HEIs in some jurisdictions, in the absence of a national policy, to target one or more of the groups addressed in the Programme Guide. But until the definitional problems are resolved, such action on a large scale appears unrealistic.
- The fact that 28% of the respondents to the student survey came from **families with no background in higher education** is positive. It suggests that for this particular category of the under-represented, the trend is moving in the right direction. It is not clear how far this shift is the result of affirmative action.
- Local custom and practice play a role in this discontinuity, particularly **affecting the willingness of the disadvantaged to self-identify**. ICM students, in their majority, regard self-identification as a feasible approach, but some have reservations regarding their own (hypothetical) readiness to do so.
- **Programmes of financial assistance, targeted by Partner Country authorities at economically disadvantaged groups, do not in general extend to the provision of funding to cover additional expenses (travel, visa, insurance) incurred in ICM mobility.** These additional costs are regarded by the students as the greatest obstacle to their participation.
- The situation regarding the OS has been clearly highlighted in this report. **OS rarely reaches Partner Country HEIs** and is almost never used to support mobility by disadvantaged students.

- **On the question of top-up awards, Programme Countries invoked strong reservations**, not only because funding was insufficient, but also because it was unpredictable (from year to year) and inflexible (when compared with KA103).
- **Overall, and regrettably, at present it cannot be clearly demonstrated that Erasmus+ significantly promotes the mobility of disadvantaged students from the Partner Countries.**

A number of **measures** can be taken to remedy, at least partially, this situation.

- First and foremost, national governments, NEOs, HEIs and other national stakeholders must be encouraged to **build awareness** of the scope which Erasmus+ offers to disadvantaged students and of the benefits which they, their institutions and wider society, can derive.
- NEOs must **explore with their ministries how national legislation can be brought into line with the good non-discriminatory practice** required by Erasmus+, in order to fulfil the Programme's commitment to affirmative action in favour of the disadvantaged.
- **Partner Country authorities** should consider convening **national forums** to examine how to share among the relevant actors the burden of defining, encouraging, identifying and certificating disadvantaged students, with a view to facilitating their mobility.
- They must also **ensure that HEIs are fully informed of national legislation**, given sound advice on how to align it with Erasmus+ requirements, and empowered to report any legal barriers to their NEOs, who should in turn inform their governments and the European Commission.
- HEIs should be urged to **collect data** relevant to the participation of disadvantaged students in ICM. This data should then be submitted to NEOs for aggregation, analysis, publication and policy deliberation, with copy to the European Commission. It should also be communicated to the coordinating HEIs in the Programme Countries, for entry into the Erasmus+ online reporting tool (currently Mobility Tool+).
- Moreover, given that the authors of this study cannot affirm the reliability of informants' identification of legislative instruments (particularly those unavailable in English), the **updating of country fiches** by NEOs will be of considerable use to Erasmus+ Programme designers.
- **HEIs should also be encouraged to take their own strategic initiatives** regarding the widening of ICM participation by disadvantaged students. The good practice developed should then be disseminated nationally by NEOs, as well as regionally and internationally in the framework of capacity building activities.
- To this end, there is a pressing need for **academic and administrative staff development**, both in ministries and in institutions, and for the results to be mainstreamed in Erasmus+ activities.

- **Inclusion should be more strongly emphasised in the monitoring process.** Notably, NEOs should be urged to probe more actively the consideration given to disadvantaged students by project partners, particularly in the selection procedures, and to detail their findings in their monitoring reports.
- At the same time, the European Commission should **consider whether it would be beneficial to return to the methodology of Action 2 of ERASMUS MUNDUS II** - which created a dedicated target group corresponding to the Erasmus+ definition - and promote debate accordingly.
- While Programme and Partner Country participants meet and discuss at project level, there is no strong evidence of similarly sustained interaction between NAs and NEOs. The drafting of IIAs and the management of OS to the benefit of disadvantaged students would be facilitated by **more robust NA-NEO communication** and the EU authorities could usefully consider how this might be achieved - with subsequent and appropriate modification of the Erasmus+ Programme guidelines.
- Selection procedures undertaken jointly by home and host HEIs are not only prevalent but advantageous. When based on good communication and mutual understanding they reinforce ownership of the project partnership. EU authorities should **consider whether to stress in the IIA the need for partners to agree explicitly on the selection criteria**. They should also consider whether to advise that there be ICM alumni representation on selection panels.
- The European Commission should provide **much clearer guidance on the management of OS** to both Programme and Partner Country participants and should ensure that its guidance is effectively monitored.
- **Logistical issues relating to the timing of transfers of grants** are frequently cited by Partner Country stakeholders. These could usefully be reviewed in discussion with the NEOs. In particular, the European Commission should take steps to ensure that project partnerships consider, in their advance planning, all possible measures to mitigate payment delays.
- It should also **consider isolating a unit cost** (as supplementary to, or as a component of, OS) **to cover the purchase of visa, associated travel and insurance**. Partner Countries would welcome moves to make these payments in advance to disadvantaged students, as would the student respondents to the survey.
- The introduction of **discretionary top ups for disadvantaged students**, which evokes strong reservations from most of the Programme Countries consulted, **should be closely monitored** and assessed in order to establish whether or not it is preferable to a unit cost approach.
- Other outstanding issues are the **accessibility of the Mobility Tool** and **the adequacy of the distance calculator** when used without consideration of the extra flight segments and mileage which can be incurred by the need to connect via major hubs. A review of their operation would be welcome, in the light of the comments made by Partner Countries. It could benefit all mobile students, but the disadvantaged even more.
- In order to overcome linguistic obstacles to mobility, the European Commission should consider targeting funding to categories of students who by virtue of, for example, ethnic origin or socio-economic background, have reduced access to tuition in the

languages of the Programme Country. One possibility would be to **extend the availability of Online Linguistic Support (OLS)** from KA103 to KA107.

- This study has considered the rural origin and location of students as a potential disadvantage - in line with the Erasmus+ definition. It has not considered the extent to which the rural location of HEIs in Partner Countries might affect institutional participation in ICM. Future **research into the international activities of HEIs in non-capital cities or in cities without airports** could be productive. It might examine, for example, the adequacy of internationalisation policies in those countries which allocate students to universities on the basis of the students' academic records.
- The **nub of the problem** remains the propensity of Partner Countries to opt in to those parts of the Erasmus+ definition of disadvantage that chime with their own legislations, customs and practices. The Erasmus+ definition, which is only indicative, is an *acquis* which, politically, cannot be imposed. It remains a question of **collaborative capacity building by Partner and Programme Countries** and it is important that such efforts continue.
- In this connection, the European Commission could nevertheless usefully consider, and advise on, the extent to which Partner Countries might be reminded explicitly of the commitments they have made (in **Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements, Association Agreements**, etc.) to the implementation of wide-ranging non-discriminatory policies.
- In the long-term, the Programme generates **in-built optimism**: the greater the number of ICM alumni, the greater the chances of cultural shifts in the Partner Countries and of more enlightened attitudes in the Programme Countries. ICM is a powerful agent of change, particularly when embedded in a strong commitment to reciprocal capacity building by Partner and Programme Countries. This is immensely reassuring. The short- and medium-term measures proposed in this report, including tighter monitoring and better resourcing of the identifiably disadvantaged, together with more explicit Programme guidelines, will help to accelerate this process.

Luisa Bunescu, Howard Davies, Michael Gaebel, January 2020

Annex I: additional note on methodology

- Under contract to the European Commission, the SPHERE consortium (the European University Association and the University of Barcelona) provides capacity building services to Partner Countries in Central Asia and Russia, as well as to those in the three regions covered by this study (Eastern Partnership, South-Mediterranean and Western Balkans). The time and resource available for the study unfortunately meant limiting its scope to the three regions with the highest volumes of student mobility.
- The SPHERE consortium examined 191 monitoring reports submitted by NEOs in the 2016, 2017 and 2018 academic sessions.
- 18 NEOs participated in the online survey of April 2019. The team followed up with 14 interviews with NEOs (via Skype) and received a written response from one.
- It also interviewed 14 HEREs and ten IROs, with a further ten written responses. The HEREs were already known to the SPHERE team. The IROs were recommended by their NEOs; no particular criteria were attached to their selection.
- Not all countries were able to participate fully: Belarus and Syria could only be approached through the monitoring reports; Libya engaged in the online survey, but had no representatives in the lists of interviewees.
- Throughout the second half of 2019, the study's methodology and preliminary results were presented and discussed on several occasions with HEREs, NEOs and selected experts from Programme Countries.

Source	Conducted in	Responses expected	Responses received	Countries
NEO monitoring reports of ICM projects	2016, 2017 and 2018		191	See table below
NEO survey	April 2019	20	18	
NEO interviews	April-August 2019	20	15	
HERE interviews	May-September 2019	20	14	
IRO interviews (Partner Countries)	July-September 2019	40	20	
NA surveys	April 2019	34	34	All Programme Countries except Iceland
NA interviews	July-September 2019	5	5	DE ES IE PL TR
IRO interviews (Programme Countries)	July-September 2019	6-8	6	ES PL TR, DE
Student survey	September-October 2019	Target: as many as possible	702	All Partner Countries in the three regions, except Libya, and with three responses from Serbia.

- The participation of each Partner Country is tabulated below:

region	country	NEO monitoring reports (number of HEIs monitored) ¹⁹			NEO survey	NEO interview or written response	HERE interview or written response	IRO interview or written response
		2016	2017	2018				
WB	AL	nil	6	3	√		√	
	BA	6	3	4	√		√	
	XK	1	5	2	√	√	√	√
	MN	nil	nil	2	√	√		√
EP	AM	nil	4	3	√	√	√	√
	AZ	One report only (2015)			√	√	√	√
	BY	nil	11	4	nil			

¹⁹ In a few instances NEOs submitted project reports, rather than institutional reports - i.e. more than one report per HEI.

	GE	3	4	nil	√	√	√	√	
	MD	2	5	6	√	√		√	
	UA	nil	6	4	√	√	√	√	
region	country	NEO monitoring reports (number of HEIs monitored)²⁰			NEO survey	NEO interview or written response	HERE interview or written response	IRO interview or written response	
		2016	2017	2018					
SM	DZ	nil	3	5	√	√	√	√	
	EG	nil	6	nil	√	√	√	√	
	IL	nil	9	5	√	√	√	√	
	JO	5	9	nil	√	√	√	√	
	LB	1	4	4	√	√	√	√	
	LY	nil			√	nil			
	MA	nil	6	1	√	√		√	
	PS	2	5	5	√	√	√	√	
	SY	2	3	1	nil				
	TN	nil	3	4	√	√	√	√	

²⁰ In a few instances NEOs submitted project reports, rather than institutional reports - i.e. more than one report per HEI.

Annex II: country codes

Partner Countries

Albania	AL
Algeria	DZ
Armenia	AM
Azerbaijan	AZ
Belarus	BY
Bosnia and Herzegovina	BA
Egypt	EG
Georgia	GE
Israel	IL
Jordan	JO
Kosovo	XK
Lebanon	LB
Libya	LY
Moldova	MD
Montenegro	ME
Morocco	MA
Palestine	PS
Syria	SY
Tunisia	TN
Ukraine	UA

Programme Countries mentioned in the text

BE	Belgium
DE	Germany
ES	Spain
IE	Ireland
PL	Poland
RO	Romania
SK	Slovakia
TR	Turkey

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Annex IV: A beacon case study - interview with Esma Gumberidze (Young European Ambassador, Georgia) on the social inclusion aspect within ICM

Personal background: Esma Gumberidze

Residence: Tbilisi

Occupation: Activist, Volunteer

Country of origin: Georgia

After graduating with honours from a public school for the blind in Tbilisi, I went to the US as a FLEX student. There I first experienced volunteering. I tutored several blind children in elementary school. Upon my return to Georgia in 2013, I continued volunteering, for instance, at GLOW and other teenage camps as a counsellor conducting discussions and trainings on women's rights, project development and management, future planning, the rights of persons with disabilities, volunteerism and youth exchange programmes. During my BA studies at Tbilisi State University, from which I just recently graduated with honours, I participated in the Erasmus+ Credit Mobility programme, spending 1 semester at the European University Viadrina in Germany, and another one at the Alexandru Ion Cuza University of Iasi in Romania. I also participated in Erasmus+ youth seminars 3 times.

Q1: Why did you decide to study abroad?

The main reasons for studying abroad were:

- ✓ being more independent
- ✓ attending classes in English and on subjects that are not offered in Georgia
- ✓ it is prestigious to study abroad and counts towards finding better employment

Q2: Who selected you for the grant?

For the first ICM mobility at the European University Viadrina (Germany) it was the Tbilisi State University (TSU) who selected me, in cooperation with Viadrina. For the second ICM mobility to Alexandru Ioana Cuza University in Iasi (Romania), I applied directly to the Romanian university, which selected me.

Q3: Once selected for ICM, what type of support were you offered by your home HEI and by your host HEI?

At my home HEI - Tbilisi State University, the administrative staff was not very helpful at the beginning, but the Deputy Dean from the Faculty of Law intervened on my behalf and then colleagues from the International Relations Office (IRO) of the university became more helpful. My home university IRO offered an orientation seminar as well as technical support with the paperwork and the visa application.

Both my host universities (Viadrina and Alexandru Ioan Cuza) provided me with the invitation letters, and upon arrival secured me a place in the student dormitory; they also provided me with bedsheets, plates and cutlery to manage in the first days.

Given that I am blind, Viadrina contacted their Accessibility Office, but the person there was clearly not prepared to handle a blind person, other than in terms of the paperwork required. She then put me in touch with their IRO, which hired an aid for me and also got me a mobility and orientation trainer who helped me with getting around the campus.

The Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Romania seemed surprised of my disability, although I let them know of my disability, right after being accepted for the ICM mobility. They asked if I can bring alongside an accompanying person to stay with me during my ICM, but I couldn't. I suggested instead that the university pays one of its students to be my accompanying person. The university then hired two local students to help me around.

Q4: Did you need additional financial support? If yes, who provided you with such support?

I did not need additional financial support, except the money paid to the accompanying persons that were hired for me by both host universities. However, talking to other students from disadvantaged backgrounds, I can say that such students find it very hard to buy themselves the plane tickets before the mobility; there are also cases when the host university is asking for a dormitory deposit to be transferred by the student before the start of the mobility. About 700-900 EUR are needed by students in advance of their mobility, an amount that many of them cannot afford.

Q5: In your case, what were the main difficulties in participating in ICM?

Being blind, I had problems accessing textbooks. For instance, a professor from Viadrina University was not willing to provide me with the Word version of his textbook due to copyright concerns. As such, I was not able to read the textbook myself and had to have someone reading it for me. Moreover, I felt that at both at Viadrina and Alexandru Ioana Cuza universities, the administration was not ready to host a blind student. At Alexandru Ioan Cuza, although at the moment of the application I was told that the classes will be in English, when I arrived most of the classes were only in Romanian.

Q6: Were you required to provide documentation proving disadvantage?

I was not required to provide such documentation at the stage of the application for ICM, only after being accepted. I suppose this was the case because the host universities had then to consider the additional funding that my disability implies, e.g. by having an accompanying person.

Q7: In your home country, which of the below categories of students do you think would have difficulties with participating in Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility?

Answers highlighted below

Students with physical disabilities
Students with learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia)
Students with economic obstacles
Immigrants or refugees or descendants from immigrant or refugee families
First generation students in higher education (i.e. students whose parents did not attend higher education)
Students from minority linguistic and cultural backgrounds
Students with minority ethnic backgrounds
Students with minority religious backgrounds
Women
Men
Students with other gender or sexual orientations
Mature students
War veterans, civil war victims, etc.
People in a precarious situation (e.g. (ex-)offenders, (ex)-drug or alcohol abusers)

Students with caring responsibilities (towards children, sick relatives, etc.)
Orphans
Students facing geographical obstacles (e.g. people from remote or rural areas; people living in small islands or in peripheral regions; people from urban problem zones; people from less serviced areas (limited public transport, poor facilities)).

Q8: If asked, do you think that students would indicate in the application form for an ICM grant that they belong to a disadvantaged group?

I do not think so, not necessarily because of social stigma, but because of lack of awareness about disadvantage. Such students would not even think that they are disadvantaged in the first place, unless we talk about a visible disability like mine. For example, an IDP might not think to include himself/herself in the category of disadvantaged students. There is therefore a lack of understanding disadvantage.

Q9: What were the main findings that you derived from your own research on the topic of inclusion in youth exchanges and in higher education?

One of my main findings is that, in general Erasmus+ students come from middle-class families and from rather privileged backgrounds.

I also noticed a lack of information among NEOs, end beneficiaries, and universities that special aid is available under Erasmus+ for people with disabilities and that diversity is an aspect to consider upon selection.

Q10: What measures do you think would make Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility more inclusive for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in your home country?

I believe that targeted information campaigns for disadvantaged students would be very helpful; campaigns should be targeted because such students already do not participate very much in the student life within their university, and so would not necessarily attend general ICM dissemination events. It would be also helpful to inform students with disadvantaged backgrounds that additional support might be available for them under ICM.

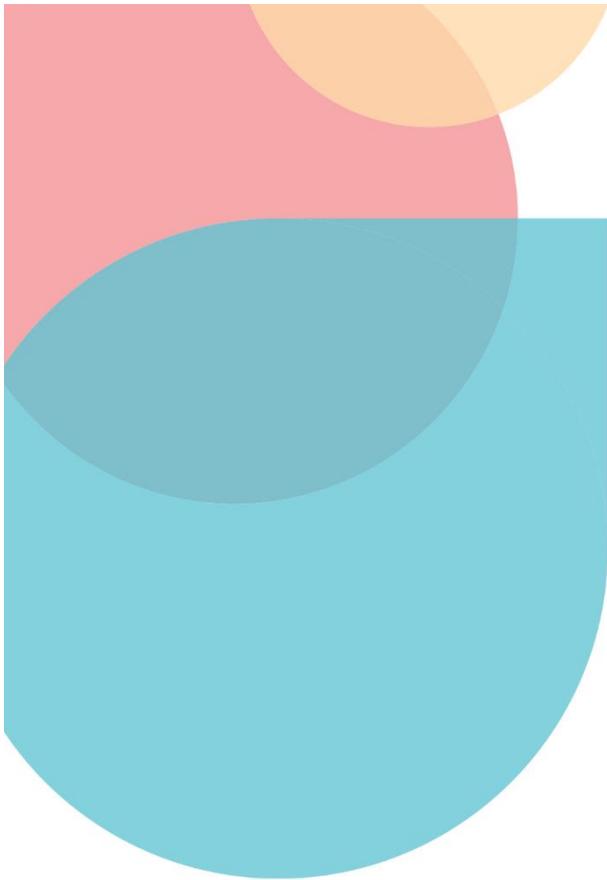
Mitigating start-off expenses (such as plane ticket, dormitory deposit, etc.) would also make a big difference for disadvantaged students.

There is little alumni life upon return from an ICM mobility; that is why I think that ICM alumni should be invited to speak more about their experience and mentor other students who want to go for ICM.

Additional considerations: Aspects of Erasmus+ youth exchanges that should be changed / improved:

- The current rules say that up to 10% of the grant in a youth exchange can cover emergency / imminent expenses, such as sudden fluctuations in the exchange rates. Involving a person with disabilities in a youth exchange and the additional costs that this might entail are however not eligible from the 10%;
- Most of the youth exchanges are mainstream projects taking place in inaccessible facilities for people with disabilities;
- There is an over-use of funds by the same people (as one could attend as many youth exchanges as possible). The NGOs end up working with the same pool of people, and they tend not to put any effort in identifying new people for youth exchanges;
- Transparency in terms of selecting the participants is also lacking - cross-selection among the project partners or centralised selection by the project lead should be made available;
- The participation fee that many NGOs are asking for is a hindrance and goes against the spirit of Erasmus+.

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