

The online survey was sent to students and graduates from the six Western Balkan (WB) countries who spent part of their studies outside the region, mostly on an Erasmus exchange programme. The aim was to identify effective approaches for improvements in the higher education system based on the experiences of students and alumni. The study was initiated by the Western Balkans Alumni Association (WBAA) research team, supported by the European Union and carried out by the Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS) in Vienna. The field phase took place in 2021/2022 and 1.320 questionnaires were analysed.

KEY RESULTS



KOSOVO*

Kosovars who study abroad...

... most often go to **North-West EU**, with Germany being the favourite country.
... and are men, study ICTs and Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction strikingly more often than female respondents.

Motivations to study abroad

Personal development is the most frequently stated motive for Kosovar respondents to study abroad. **Access to a better higher education system abroad** is the second most mentioned reason to study outside the Western Balkan, followed by the opportunity to live and study in another country.

Difficulties

More than every tenth respondent from Kosovo doubts that their theoretical knowledge was sufficient for studying abroad (13%). Nearly half of all Kosovar students feel that they **lacked practical knowledge or skills for studying outside the WB** (45%), and about a third consider their previous methodological skills were insufficient (27%). Kosovars differ very much from all other respondents in their high prevalence in **problems with access regulations** (e.g. obtaining a visa or residence permit) (39% vs. Ø°21%). Furthermore, Kosovars struggled with an additional financial burden (20%), a lack of information from their higher education institution (20%) and finding accommodation abroad (18%). However, most

frequently Kosovar respondents had difficulties to return to their previous life in their home country after the study period abroad (47%).

Impact on personality and skills

Kosovars are more likely than respondents from other WB countries to say that their study experience abroad had an **impact on their career**, whereby this is more often the case for men than for women. (Oral) communication skills and critical thinking have improved the most as a result of the study experience abroad, with women stating the latter remarkably more often. For men, problem-solving skills improved just as often as team-working skills for women. What has (highly) improved for almost all the Kosovars surveyed is that they have become more **open and curious about new challenges** because of their stay abroad. Moreover, many more women say that their commitment to stand against any kind of discrimination and intolerance has improved.

Where to live in the future?

Half of the Kosovar respondents **would like to live in an EU country** (53%). But they also choose their own country as an attractive future place to live more often than respondents from other WB countries (48%). This is consistent with the finding that they have one of

*) This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration.

the highest proportion of respondents living in the Western Balkan (81%).

The most mentioned motivations which would convince Kosovars to live in WB (again) are:

1. A salary level that enables a standard of living that meets their expectations,
2. Better quality of life, good living conditions,
3. A stimulating and motivating working environment.

Employment situation

40% of the Kosovar respondents are employed and no longer studying, and 8% are looking for a job. They often work at a university. While the majority (80%) are employed in WB, about one in seven (14%) work in an EU country and only a small share (3%) commutes between these regions.

Impact of the study experience abroad on the job situation

It is noteworthy that half of all employed Kosovar respondents indicate that they **have their current job because of the skills acquired during their studies abroad**. Even more state that they use the knowledge and skills they acquired during their study abroad in their current job (65%). Kosovar professionals more often report a vertical mismatch than a horizontal mismatch, i.e. they feel more often over-qualified for their job than they feel that their field of study does not fit their job. Overall, one quarter (24%) state they have at least one **mismatch in their current job**. Nevertheless, three quarter (74%) indicate to be satisfied with their job, which is above average.

Evaluation of study conditions in Kosovo

Kosovar respondents evaluate the quality of teaching at their home universities worse: they rate the **field-specific knowledge** of the lecturers at their host university considerably more often as (very) good than that of the lecturers in Kosovo (95% vs. 63%). The Kosovar respondents also rate the **teaching competencies** of the home lecturers worse than those of the host lecturers, with an even greater difference (87% vs. 53%). Furthermore, they experienced a great difference in the **pedagogical attitudes** between the home and host lecturers: Kosovar lecturers were less likely to teach students to think critically or explain well. The biggest difference noted by Kosovar respondents is that **host teachers treat students much more respectfully than teachers in Kosovo**.

Furthermore, respondents from Kosovo are dissatisfied about the **study organisation and curriculum** in their home country. For example, more than half (55%) of the respondents criticise that they were *not* allowed to choose enough courses according to their interests at the university in Kosovo, while only 9% experienced this at the university outside the WB. Similarly, more than half of the respondents from Kosovo wish for more external lecturers and less courses with compulsory attendance. Among all WB countries, Kosovar respondents complain most often about overcrowded classes in their home country (47% vs. Ø37%).

Another major difference between the study experiences in Kosovo and outside the WB is evident in the assessment of the state of the **physical and digital infrastructure**: only 21% rate the physical infrastructure at home (compared to 90% abroad) and only 19% rate the digital infrastructure (compared to 88% abroad) as (very) satisfying.

What Kosovar students want to see improved

Respondents were asked to select their **top 3 recommendations for improvement** from a range of suggestions on different aspects of higher education. Kosovar respondents who have studied both in the Kosovar higher education system and outside the WB region select the following aspects most frequently:

Curricula

- More or stronger practice-orientated courses
- More courses to train soft skills
- More courses with an interdisciplinary approach

Modes of teaching & learning

- Practical application of knowledge
- Student-teacher discussions
- Group/ project work with other students

Student support

- Provide career support
- Facilitate internships abroad and study mobility
- Provide better study counselling in advance

Higher education system

- Modernise infrastructures at universities
- Improve research support
- Provide (more) study grants and scholarships

Teaching system

- Implement modern teaching methods
- Teachers should encourage more critical thinking
- Establish digital learning

Study organisation

- Facilitate student involvement in research projects
- More freedom in choice of courses
- Facilitate transition to labour market

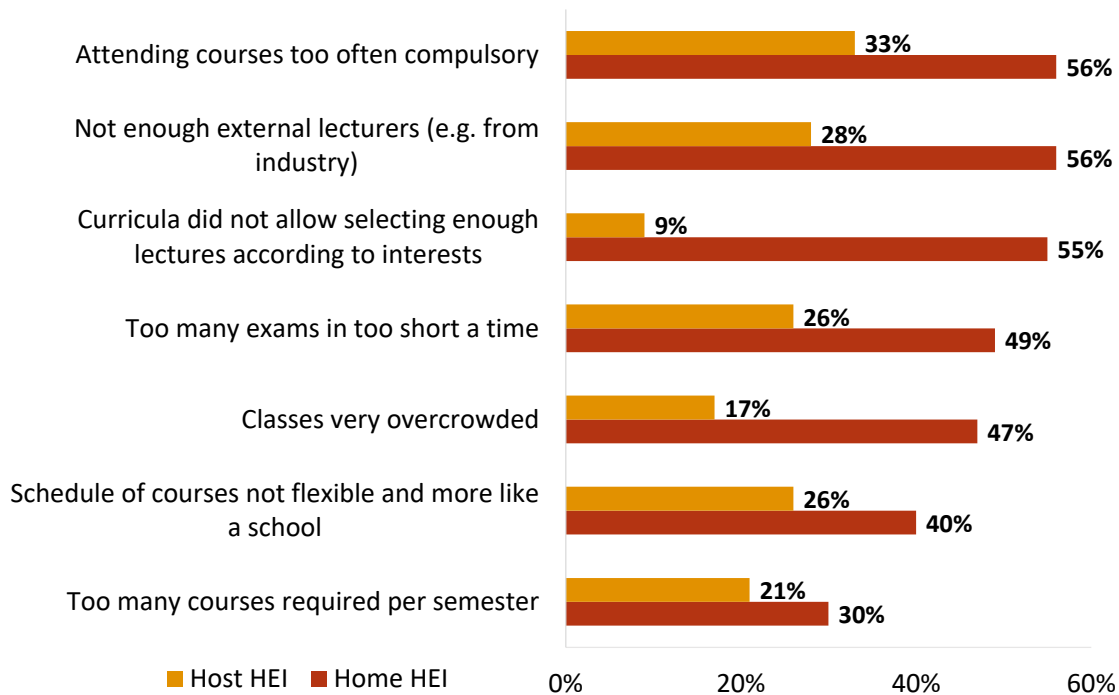
Resulting proposals for improving the study conditions

Improvements with relatively little financial investment (as opposed to investment in infrastructure or more study grants) could therefore consist of improving the **quality of teaching** by promoting a more egalitarian pedagogical attitude among lecturers, offering regular training courses to improve lecturers' field-specific knowledge and their teaching skills. The **study organisation and the curricula** should also be reconsidered, with more freedom as well as flexibility in the choice of courses. It would help students to reduce the number of exams at peak times and to sit in less crowded classes. Students and alumni

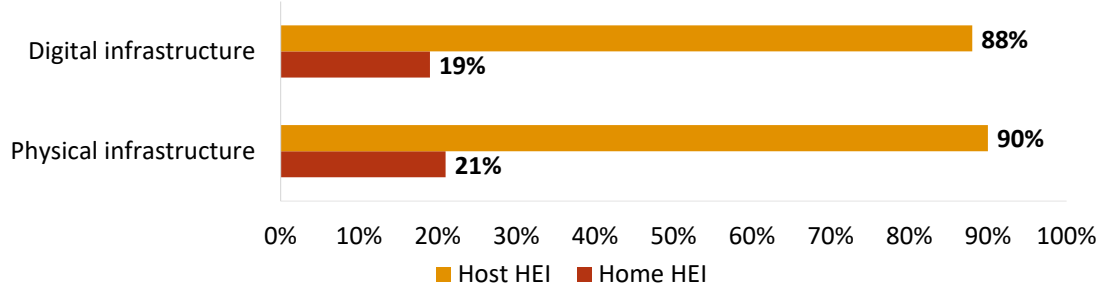
want to expand their career opportunities and do internships or learn new skills – practical skills seem to be in particular demand, but also soft-skill training. Inviting more external lecturers (also for professional networking) and facilitating participation in research projects are deemed helpful by the respondents.

For all respondents in the six WB countries and for all topics queried, the top three aspects include two that place a stronger emphasis on practical skills in the teaching. Additionally, all respondents see a great need to improve the **infrastructure** at universities in the Western Balkans.

Curricula & study organisation: agreement with statements about home vs. host higher education institution



Digital and physical infrastructure rating as (very) satisfying: home vs. host higher education institution



Rating of the quality of teaching staff: home vs. host university

