

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



ALBANIA

Albanians who study abroad...

- ... most often go to **Southern EU**, with Italy being the favourite country.
- ... often complete an entire degree abroad, and joint degrees are most popular among Albanian respondents.
- ... frequently study in the field of Business, Administration and Law.

Motivations to study abroad

Personal development is by far the most frequently stated motive for Albanian respondents to study abroad, followed by the opportunity to live and study in another country and the expected career benefits; **access to a better, higher education system abroad** is also a frequently indicated motive.

Difficulties

Respondents from Albania had the **greatest doubts about their methodological and practical knowledge or skills**, as they often assess them as (rather) insufficient for studies outside the Western Balkans compared to all other countries. They experienced difficulties before and during their studies abroad because they did not receive enough information from their higher education institution, did not find accommodation abroad or had problems with access regulations (e.g. obtaining a visa or residence permit), and an additional financial burden is also one of the most frequently mentioned aspects. It is striking that many more

women than men experienced **difficulties returning to their former life** in Albania (53% women vs. 33% men).

Impact on personality and skills

Albanians are more likely than respondents from other WB countries to say that their study experience abroad had an **impact on their career**. (Oral) communication skills is the number one skill that has improved due to the study experience abroad, followed by critical thinking and team-working skills, which is quite in line with the average. Albanian women are more likely to say that their study abroad experience had the greatest impact on their language skills, while men are more likely to say that the greatest impact was on their personal development. While studying abroad has contributed to greater resilience against discrimination and intolerance for the vast majority of respondents, this is mentioned particularly often by respondents from Albania.

Where to live in the future?

More than half of the respondents from all six WB countries **would like to live in an EU country**, with Albanians being the most likely to state this with 65%. Moreover, Albanian respondents are among the least likely to choose their own country as an attractive future place to live (23%). This is consistent with the finding that they have the highest proportion of respondents living in the EU (23% vs. Ø 18%).

The most mentioned motivations which would convince Albanians 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. Financial and social security, a stable political system.

Employment situation

Half of Albanian respondents are employed and no longer studying, and one in ten are looking for a job. They comparatively often work in public administration (18%). While the majority (75%) are employed in WB, about one in seven (14%) work in an EU country and only a small share (6%) commutes between these regions. This is in line with the average of all WB countries.

Impact of the study experience abroad on the job situation

It is noteworthy that half of all employed Albanian respondents indicate that they **hold 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 (62%). About one fifth of Albanian respondents report a vertical mismatch, i.e. they feel overqualified for their current job. And almost as many also report that they do not work in the field in which they studied (horizontal mismatch). Overall, one third (30%) state they have at least one **mismatch in their current job**. Nevertheless, more than 70% of Albanians indicate to be (very) satisfied with their job, which is above average.

Evaluation of study conditions in Albania

Among Albanian respondents, the **greatest difference in the evaluation of the quality of**

teaching between the home and host universities is found: they rate the **field-specific knowledge** of the lecturers at their (last) host university significantly better than that of the lecturers in their home country (57% vs. 95%). Similarly, respondents from Albania rate the **teaching skills of the Albanian lecturers** much worse than of the host teachers (50% vs. 94%). Respondents from Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina also give the worst rating when it comes to the **pedagogical attitudes** of their home lecturers. Thus, they experienced a particularly large difference in the quality of the lecturers' ability to explain, in the way they give motivating impulses, and they frequently indicate a lack of lecturers' interest in what the students have to say. However, the greatest difference noted by the Albanian respondents is that the host lecturers were far more likely to motivate students to **think critically** or to challenge prevailing opinions.

Furthermore, in five out of seven aspects, more than half of the respondents from Albania complain about the **study organisation and curriculum** in their home country. For example, more than half (59%) of the respondents criticise that they were *not* allowed to choose enough courses according to their interests at the university in Albania, while only 6% experienced this at their host university outside the WB. Similarly, more than half of the respondents wish for more external lecturers, fewer exams in a short time or a more flexible schedule and no overcrowded classes. Another major difference between the study experiences in Albania and outside the WB is evident in the assessment of the state of the **physical and digital infrastructure**: only 16% rate the physical infrastructure at home (compared to 93% abroad) and only 15% rate the digital infrastructure (compared to 89% abroad) as (very) satisfying.

What Albanian 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. Albanian respondents who have studied both in the Albanian 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 extra-curricular student activities

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
- Create a culture of giving and receiving feedback between teachers and students

Study organisation

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

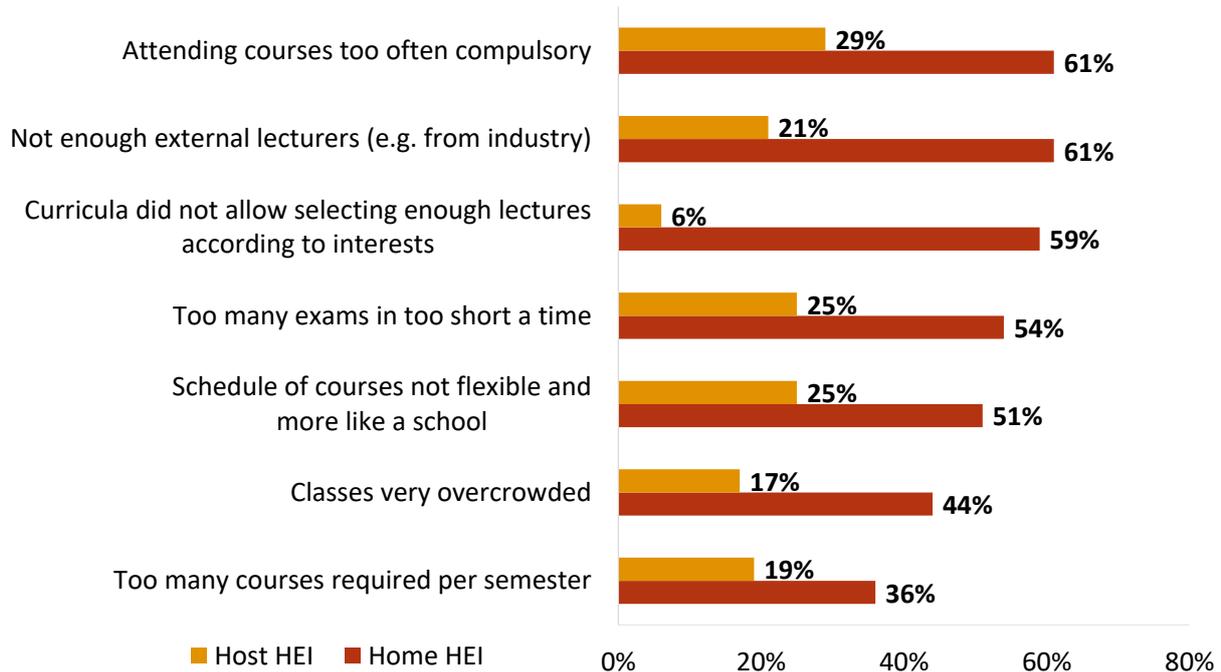
Resulting proposals for improving the study conditions

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, as well as offering regular training courses to improve lecturers' subject-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 attend less crowded classes. Students and alumni

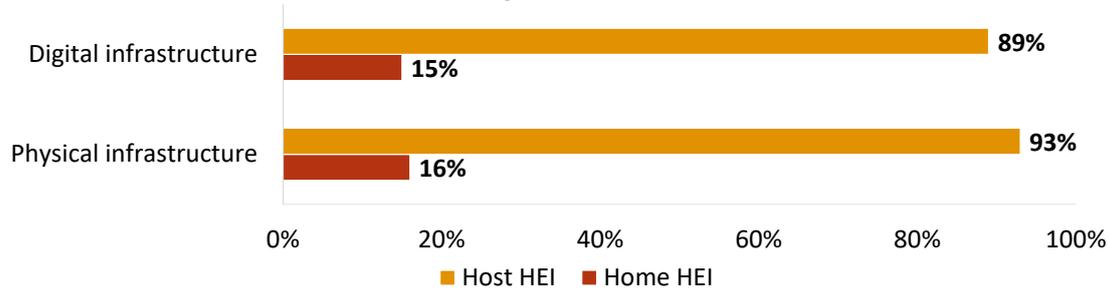
want to expand their career opportunities and do internships or learn new skills – practical skills seem to be in particular demand, but also soft-skill training. Inviting more external lecturers (also for professional networking) and facilitating participation in research projects are deemed helpful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

