

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



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Bosnians 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 from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Motivations to study abroad

The opportunity to live and study in another country is the most frequently stated motive to study abroad for Bosnian respondents, followed by personal development. In addition, one of the three most important motives for studying abroad is the possibility of gaining **access to a better higher education system** abroad.

Difficulties

About one in ten respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina doubt that their theoretical knowledge was sufficient for studies outside the Western Balkans. More than twice as many (24%) consider their methodological skills were (rather) insufficient, and even four times as many respondents (40%) think that their **prior practical knowledge was insufficient to study outside the WB**. A quarter of Bosnian respondents had difficulties finding accommodation abroad before and during their study abroad (24%), they also lacked information from the university (20%) and had difficulties with an additional financial burden (19%).

Slightly fewer (15%) also had problems with access regulations (e.g. obtaining a visa or residence permit). However, the most frequently mentioned difficulty is **returning to their previous life in their home country** after the study period abroad (46%).

Impact on personality and skills

(Oral) communication skills are the number one skill that has improved due to the study experience abroad, followed by critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Bosnian women are more likely to state that their experience abroad had an impact on their personality and intercultural skills. Men are more likely to say that their experience had an impact on their career and language skills. What has improved most often across all Bosnian respondents is that they have become **more open and curious about new challenges** as a result of their stay abroad.

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**, 61% of Bosnians would also like to do so. Moreover, Bosnian respondents are among the least likely to choose their own country as an attractive future place to live (29%). This is consistent with the finding that they have a high proportion of respondents living in the EU (22% vs. Ø°18%). However, they also relatively often state that they want to live in more than one country.

The most mentioned motivations which would convince Bosnians 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.

It is also striking that Bosnians select “an improved political situation at home” as a motivator twice as often as the average of all countries.

Employment situation

36% of the Bosnian respondents are employed and no longer studying, and 11% of the graduates are looking for a job (excluding students). They work in an international organisation comparatively often, but rarely in public administration, and mainly in the business sector. This fits with the finding that **Bosnians are by far the most likely of all respondents to work in the EU** and the least likely to work in the Western Balkans.

Impact of the study experience abroad on the job situation

It is noteworthy that three-quarters of the employed Bosnian respondents say that they use the knowledge and skills they acquired during their study abroad in their current job (74%). Slightly fewer say that they **hold their current job because of the skills acquired during their study abroad** (65%). Bosnian professionals report a vertical mismatch more often than a horizontal mismatch, i.e. they feel overqualified for their current job more often than they feel that their field of study does not fit their job. Overall, one third of the employed Bosnians reports to have at least one **mismatch in their current job** (27%). However, the majority of Bosnian respondents are (very) satisfied with their current job (71%).

Evaluation of study conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnian respondents assess the quality of teaching by Bosnian teachers significantly lower than that of their host lecturers. Almost all Bosnian respondents rate the **teaching skills** of the host lecturers as (very) good, while only half say this about their home lecturers (91% vs. 49%). In terms of **field-specific knowledge**, the host lecturers are also strikingly more often rated as (very) good than the Bosnian teachers, even if the difference is somewhat smaller (92% vs. 63%). The respondents from Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina rate the **pedagogical attitudes** of the home teachers the worst compared to respondents of other WB countries. Thus, they experienced a particularly big difference in lecturers teaching students to think critically, taking an interest in what students have to say and providing motivational impulses. It is noteworthy that the Bosnian respondents notice the biggest difference in the host teachers treating the students much more respectfully.

Furthermore, half of the Bosnians negatively evaluate five out of seven aspects of the **study organisation and curriculum**: For example, two-thirds (65%) of the respondents criticise that they were *not* allowed to choose enough courses according to their interests at their Bosnian university, while only 6% experienced this at their host university. Similarly, two-thirds wish for fewer exams in a short time, less courses with compulsory attendance or more external lecturers. Another major difference between the study experiences in Bosnia and outside the WB is evident in the assessment of the state of the **physical and digital infrastructure**: only 24% rate the physical infrastructure at home (compared to 93% abroad) and only 22% rate the digital infrastructure (compared to 85% abroad) as (very) satisfying.

What Bosnian 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. Bosnian respondents who have studied both in the Bosnian 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

- Teachers should encourage more critical thinking
- Implement modern teaching methods
- Create a culture of giving and receiving feedback between teachers and students

Study organisation

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

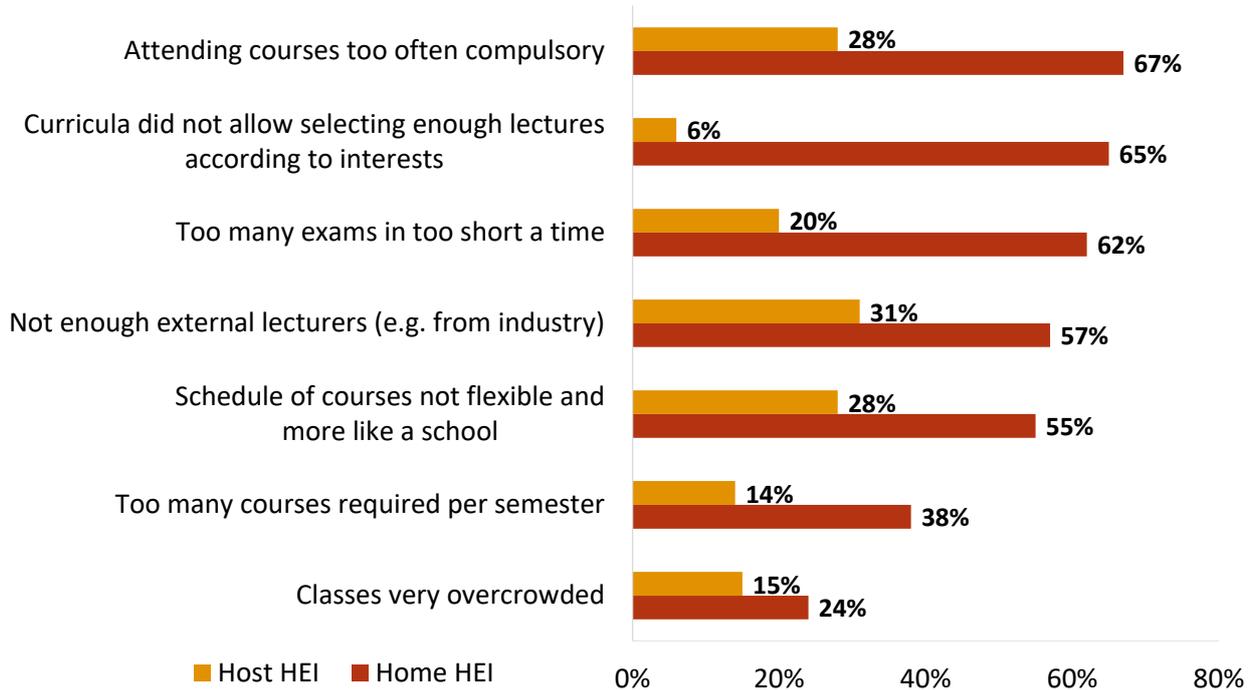
Resulting proposals for improving the study conditions

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 in the choice of courses and the number of exams at peak times should be reduced. Students and alumni want to expand their career opportunities and do internships or learn new

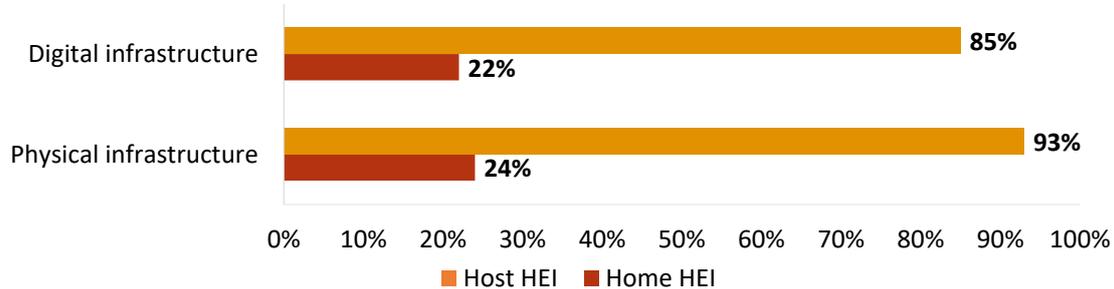
skills – practical skills seem to be in particular demand, but also soft-skill training. Inviting more external lecturers (also for professional networking) and facilitating participation in research projects are deemed helpful by the Bosnian respondents.

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

