

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



# NORTH MACEDONIA

## North Macedonians who study abroad...

- ... most often go to **Eastern EU countries**, with Turkey being the favourite country.
- ... and are women, study Health & Welfare strikingly more often than male respondents from North Macedonia.

## Motivations to study abroad

The opportunity to live and study in another country is the most frequently stated motive for North Macedonian respondents to study abroad, 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

Every seventh respondent (15%) from North Macedonia doubts that their prior theoretical knowledge was sufficient for studies outside the Western Balkans. Twice as many respondents (28%) say that their previous methodological skills were insufficient, and two in five respondents (42%) think that their **prior practical skills were insufficient to study outside the Western Balkan**. Compared to the other WB countries, North Macedonians experienced an additional financial burden due to their stay abroad more frequently (27% vs Ø 19%). A lack of information from their higher education institution and access regulations (e.g. visa,

residence permit) were also problems they faced often. However, for the half of North Macedonian respondents was **returning to their previous life in their home country** after their study period abroad a difficulty (49%).

## Impact on personality and skills

Among North Macedonian respondents, **(oral) communication skills**, critical thinking and problem-solving skills were most likely to have improved as a result of the study experience abroad, with women being significantly more likely to indicate an improvement in their communication skills. Men are more likely to perceive the greatest impact of their study experience on their professional careers, whereas North Macedonian women are strikingly more likely than men to report an improvement in their personal abilities, especially in terms of awareness of their own goals, self-confidence, and commitment against discrimination or in support of disadvantaged people.

## 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 North Macedonians being among those most likely to say so, with 62%. Moreover, North Macedonian respondents are the least likely to choose their own country as an attractive future place to live (18%). And they have the highest proportion of respondents living and working in countries that are neither part of the Western Balkans nor the EU.

The most mentioned motivations which would convince North Macedonians 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 North Macedonian respondents are employed and no longer studying, and one in ten are looking for a job (9%, excluding students). They often work in the business sector (61%). Although the majority (75%) work in the Western Balkans, this makes North Macedonia one of the countries with the lowest share among WB respondents, with about one in seven (15%) working in an EU country and almost as many in non-EU and non-WB countries (12%).

## Impact of the study experience abroad on the job situation

It is noteworthy that half of all employed North Macedonian respondents indicate that they use the knowledge and skills they acquired during their study abroad in their current job. Two in five respondents state to **have their current job because of the skills acquired during their studies abroad**. North Macedonian professionals more often report a vertical mismatch compared to a horizontal mismatch, i.e. they feel more often overqualified for their current job than they feel that their field of study does not fit their job. Overall, one third (28%) state they have at least one **mismatch in their current job**. Even though nearly two-thirds of North Macedonians are (very) satisfied with their current job, they are the least likely to report being satisfied compared to

other respondents in WB countries (61% vs. 70%).

## Evaluation of study conditions in North Macedonia

Among North Macedonian respondents, satisfaction with the **quality of teaching** by their home lecturers is the lowest: Less than half of the respondents rate the **teaching competencies** of their home lecturers as (very) good whereas the majority do so for the host lecturers (45% vs. 85%). The same applies to the **field-specific knowledge** of the lecturers: North Macedonians rate those of the lecturers at their host university significantly better than those of the lecturers in their home country (55% vs. 89%). They also rate the **pedagogical attitudes** of the North Macedonian lecturers worse than those at their host country. Thus, they experienced a particularly big difference in the quality of the lecturers' ability to explain or to educate students to think critically or in the way they give motivating impulses.

Furthermore, in four out of seven aspects, half of the respondents from North Macedonia are dissatisfied about the **study organisation and curriculum** in their home country. For example, more than half (58%) of the respondents criticise that there were *not* enough external lecturers (e.g. from industry). Similarly, more than half of the respondents would like to see less compulsory attendance in courses, fewer exams in a short time or a choice of courses according to their own interests.

Another major difference between the study experiences in North Macedonia and outside the WB is evident in the assessment of the state of the **physical and digital infrastructure**: only 28% rate the physical infrastructure at home (compared to 88% abroad) and only 27% rate the digital infrastructure (compared to 82% abroad) as (very) satisfying.

## What North Macedonian 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. North Macedonian respondents who have studied both in the North Macedonian 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
- Provide (more) study grants and scholarships
- Improve research support

### Teaching system

- Teachers should encourage more critical thinking
- Implement modern teaching methods
- Invest in field-related competencies of teachers

### Study organisation

- Facilitate student involvement in research projects
- Facilitate transition to labour market
- More external lecturers

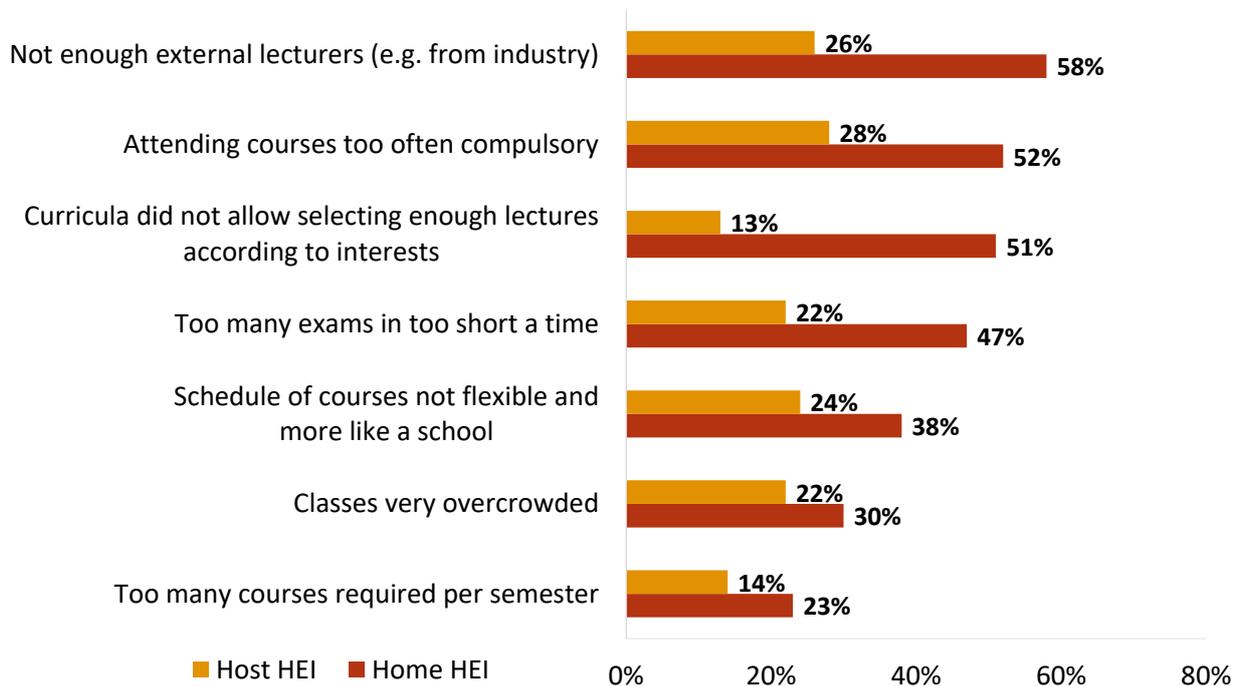
## Resulting proposals for improving the study conditions

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** 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 in the choice of courses and it would help students to reduce the number of exams at peak times. Students and alumni want to expand their career opportunities and do internships or learn new skills – practical

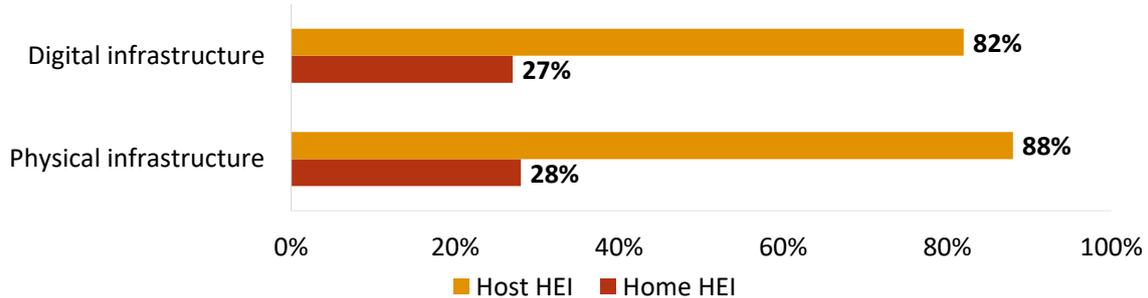
skills seem to be in particular demand, but also soft-skill training. Inviting more external lecturers (also for professional networking) and facilitating participation in research projects are deemed as helpful by the respondents.

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

