

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



SERBIA

Serbian students who study abroad...

- ... most often go to **North-West EU**, with Germany being the favourite country.
- ... to obtain a full degree, are more likely to study in a joint degree than in a traditional degree programme.
- ... and are men, study ICTs and Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction strikingly more often than female respondents.

Motivations to study abroad

The **opportunity to live and study in another country** is the most frequently stated motive for Serbian respondents to study abroad, followed by the opportunity to make new experience and personal development. Among the three most important motives for studying abroad is also the prospect of deepening their knowledge in their field of study.

Difficulties

Only 8% of respondents from Serbia complain that their prior theoretical knowledge was insufficient for studying outside the Western Balkans. In contrast, more than four times as many respondents (36%) say that **their prior practical knowledge was insufficient to study outside the WB**. 19% considered their methodological skills were (rather) insufficient.

One in five students (22%) experienced difficulties before and during their study abroad due to an additional financial burden or due to

a lack of information from their Serbian higher education institution, and the same number of students had difficulties finding accommodation abroad. Slightly fewer (17%) also had problems with access regulations (e.g. obtaining a visa or residence permit). It is striking that many more **women** than men had **difficulties returning to their former life** in Serbia (50% women vs. 38% men).

Impact on personality and skills

(Oral) communication skills is the number one skill that has improved due to the study experience abroad, followed by critical thinking and problem-solving skills. While Serbian women more often report an improvement in their intercultural competencies and critical thinking skills as a result of their study abroad, men more often state that their communication skills have improved and that the study abroad experience has had an impact on their social networks. It is also noticeable that women state more frequently that their **awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses** had (greatly) improved as a result of the study period 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**, 62% of Serbians would also like to do so. Serbians also comparatively often see their own country as an attractive future place to live (42%).

The most mentioned motivations which would convince Serbians 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 Serbian respondents are employed and no longer studying, and 8% of the graduates are looking for a job (excluding students). Compared to respondents of the other WB countries, they more frequently work at a university (19%) and in the business sector (62%). The vast majority (82%) are employed in WB, while Serbians work relatively rarely in an EU country (9% vs. Ø°14%).

Impact of the study experience abroad on the job situation

It is noteworthy that two in five employed Serbian respondents indicate that they **hold their current job because of the skills acquired during their studies abroad** (42%). Even more state that they use the knowledge and skills they acquired during their study abroad in their current job (59%).

Serbian professionals are the most likely to report a vertical mismatch compared to respondents in all other countries, i.e. they feel overqualified for their current job. Slightly less often, but with the highest value among WB countries, Serbians say they do not work in the field in which they studied (horizontal mismatch). This results in almost half of employed Serbians being affected by at least one **mismatch in their current job** (46%), which is higher than in any other WB country. Nevertheless, 69% say they are (very) satisfied with their job, which is quite close to the average.

Evaluation of study conditions in Serbia

When Serbian respondents evaluate the **quality of teaching**, their home universities score much lower than their host universities: While both the field-specific knowledge and the teaching skills of the teachers at the host universities are rated as (very) good by almost all Serbian respondents (both 88%), the Serbian teachers score worse especially in **teaching competencies** (56%). However, the **field-specific knowledge** is also rated as (very) good less often (67%). Similarly, respondents rate the **pedagogical attitudes** of the home lecturers worse than those of the host lecturers. Thus, they experienced a particularly big difference in the lecturers' ability to give motivating impulses, to treat students respectfully and in the way lecturers show interest in what students have to say. The biggest difference stated by the Serbian respondents is that the host lecturers were far more likely to motivate students to **think critically**.

Furthermore, at least half of the Serbians are dissatisfied in all surveyed aspects of 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 Serbia, while only 8% experienced this at their host university outside the WB. Similarly, more than half of the respondents wish for fewer exams in a short time, more external lecturers or a more flexible schedule. Another major difference between the study experiences in Serbia and outside the WB is evident in the assessment of the state of the **physical and digital infrastructure**: only 25% rate the physical infrastructure at home (compared to 92% abroad) and only 20% rate the digital infrastructure (compared to 85% abroad) as (very) satisfying.

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

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

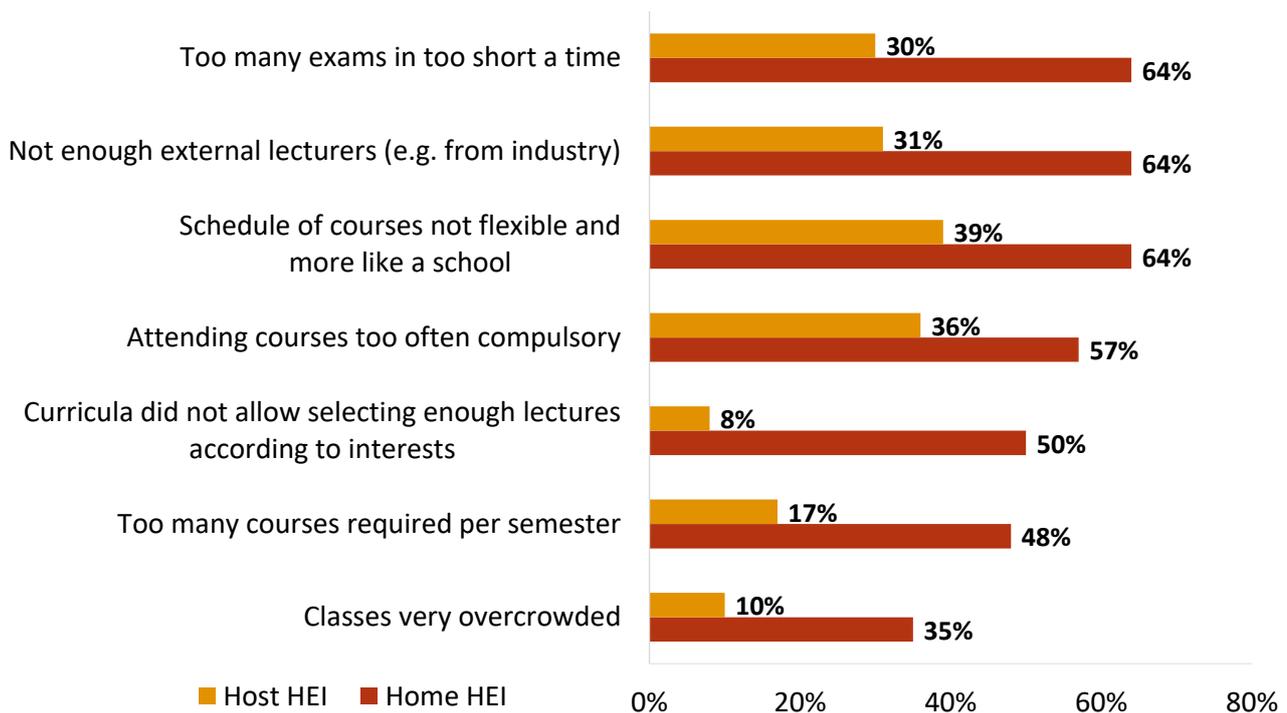
Resulting proposals for improving the study conditions

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' 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 and the number of exams at peak times should be reduced. Students and alumni want to expand their career opportunities and

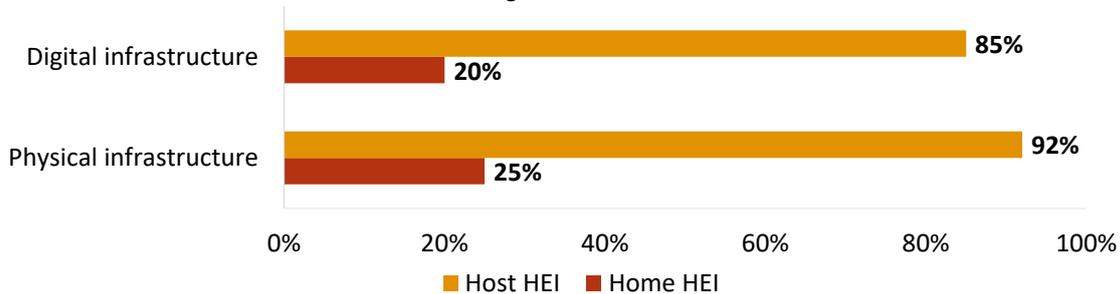
do internships or learn new skills – practical skills seem to be in particular demand, but also soft-skill training. Inviting more external lecturers (also for professional networking) and facilitating participation in research projects are deemed helpful by the respondents.

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

