

RESEARCH REPORT

The Impact of COVID-19 on Erasmus Mundus Programs: Student and Practitioner Voices

Jessica D. Schüller and Flávia Soares De Oliveira Colus

Contents

Forward	4
Acknowledgments	4
Executive Summary	5
Method	7
Results & Findings	10
Initial Responses and Housing Issues	10
Early Adjustments and Decision-Making	16
Communication and Information	19
Impact on Degree Requirements and Completion	20
Travel and Visa Challenges	23
Mental Health	23
Development of Support Initiatives	24
Overall Student Satisfaction with Program Responses	25

Copyright © 2021 by Jessica D. Schüller and Flávia Soares De Oliveira Colus. All rights reserved.

Title: The Impact of COVID-19 on Erasmus Mundus Programs: Student and Practitioner Voices

Authors, including data analysis: Jessica D. Schüller and Flávia Soares De Oliveira Colus.

This information can be freely used and copied for non-commercial purposes, provided appropriate credit is given and any changes made are indicated.

Please refer to the research report as:

Schueller, J. & Colus, F. (2020). The Impact of COVID-19 on Erasmus Mundus Programs: Student and Practitioner Voices.

Forward

About a month after our own Erasmus Mundus program had been moved into an entirely online situation and our cohort scattered across the globe, we saw a need to build on other vital research being done more broadly about the impact of COVID-19 on higher education. By narrowing in on Erasmus Mundus programs, we aimed to contribute to the management of these programs during the COVID-19 outbreak, but also contribute to a larger conversation about education abroad and emergency preparedness in international higher education. As Erasmus Mundus participants, our entire programs are based on mobility schemes, and thus a simple postponement of a study abroad semester is not possible. For us, degree completion seemed for a split second at risk, and we wanted to know how our peers were dealing with the situation and how other programs were adapting to the circumstances. We know that this was not an easy time to be on a highly mobile program, nor in the position of having to coordinate one. Our goal was to create space for these experiences to be shared to record a memory of a time in which emergency response and student support jolted. Many students and programs made quick decisions because of the looming lockdowns in March 2020, and we wanted to document the impact of those to inform both student and practitioner decision-making for the pandemic-influenced scenarios coming in the months following, and for future emergency situations. As students on an Erasmus Mundus program and as budding higher education professionals, we knew it would be vital to facilitate a discussion between students and practitioners, instead of taking on a unidirectional nature of advice-giving. Our aim was to provide valuable insight into how these high-mobility programs adapted to COVID-19, draw lessons from their experience, and shape recommendations for current programs. With this, we are happy to present our report to you and hope that you also—whether you are a student or practitioner reading—see it as a conversation with vital insight.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our Erasmus Mundus program *Research and Innovation in Higher Education* (MARIHE) for supporting our research project. Special thanks to Dr. Jussi Kivistö, Dr. Filiz Keser-Aschenberger, and Florian Reisky, M.A. Finally, this research would not have been possible without the Erasmus Mundus students and program managers who shared their experiences and stories—thank you for your contributions.

Executive Summary

The Erasmus program is the leading internationalization program of the European Union and thus an integral component of European higher education policy. The COVID-19 outbreak has disrupted international education across the globe, with many Erasmus programs postponed or interrupted. In Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree (EMJMD) programs, diverse student groups transit through multiple countries. Mobility is a foundational component, not an additional experience. Our research sought to explore how programs responded to the COVID-19 crisis, and what the current and projected effects on student degree completion and experience are.

This research report outlines the results and findings from the mixed methods study conducted from June 2020–September 2020. The student survey was open from June 1 until August 15, 2020, and asked students about their program's response to the COVID-19 crisis and how they were impacted. In total 658 Erasmus Mundus students took part, broken down by incoming 383 (58%) and current 275 (42%). Most students (n=547, 83%) were Erasmus Mundus scholarship holders. In total, 12 program managers from 10 programs participated in interviews. Key findings include:

Initial Responses and Housing Issues

- Well over half of current students (n=172, 62%) indicated that the program communicated the decision to stay in the host country or go to the home country could be determined by the students themselves.
- 71% of incoming students reported that their programs were moving forward as planned.
- Most students (n=545, 83%) showed that their current living situation was affordable, and over half reported not having any issues with their housing.

Early Adjustments and Decision-Making

- As of summer 2020, 40% of programs had decided on a hybrid model of instruction for the Fall 2020 semester. However, over a third had not yet decided, or had not yet informed students of their decision.
- Regarding student satisfaction with decision-making, 34% of students were neutral, yet 20% were unsatisfied.

Communication and Information

- Communication issues were one of the most frequently cited concerns of students; they reported wanting more frequent, clearer and faster communication from their programs. Interestingly, current students were notably less satisfied with program communication (n=198) than incoming students (n=290). At the same time, all ten program managers reported increasing communication efforts with students.

Impact on Degree Requirements and Completion

- Over 100 students commented on how their degree components (mobilities, internships, research practicums, etc.) were impacted or changed entirely because of the situation, and how this fundamentally changed their program experience. Despite this discouraging situation and increased demands that came with the online learning environment, 95% of students said that they were still planning to complete their Erasmus Mundus program amid the circumstances brought on by COVID-19.

Travel and Visa Challenges:

- The mobility restrictions caused by the pandemic were one of the most important challenges faced by both program managers (n=12) and students (n=68). Incoming students were facing difficulties getting to the program countries in due time, and current students often could not move to the planned countries or to go back home.
- Students frequently reported wishing their programs would provide better and more support on visa applications and mobility during the pandemic.

Mental Health

- 95 student respondents reported mental health concerns such as anxiety, stress, loneliness and depression.
- Students expressed that programs could have eased the pandemic burden on their mental health by demonstrating empathy with the student situation and by connecting students with mental health services when necessary.
- Similarly, 4 program managers reported the challenges of working from home, both from a pragmatic perspective of difficult communication with colleagues, and from the mental health perspective of dealing with family and an increased amount of work that came from the need for change and adaptation due to COVID.

Development of Support Initiatives

- Only half of the current students (n=134) mentioned additional support measures were put in place by their programs during the pandemic.
- The most frequently mentioned initiatives were: creating moments of interaction, group chats, and other activities with the students (n=69); openness to informal communication (n=33); and mental health support (n=18)

Overall Student Satisfaction with Program Responses

- Most students reported being satisfied with the overall response from their programs (44%) but incoming students were notably more satisfied.
- While both current and incoming students reported feeling anxious about the impact of COVID-19 on their program, the majority felt that their program would deal with the changes in the best way possible (n=342, 52%).

Method

We conducted this research in the summer aftershock of COVID-19: between July 1–August 15, 2020. The research methods used included an online student survey and online interviews with program managers. In total, 12 program managers and 658 students took part in this research. The program managers represented 8 countries and the students over 100 countries.

We present an overview of the convergent parallel mixed methods design used in this study in table 1, including the research questions that drove our investigation.

TABLE 1

Research Design

Research Questions	Methods	Analysis	Convergence & Discussion
RQ1: How did programs respond to the COVID-19 outbreak?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with program managers • Student survey 	Interviews with program managers: Inductive coding in atlas.ti	What can we learn from EM programs' response to COVID-19?
RQ2: How were students affected personally and academically by COVID-19?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student survey 	Survey: Descriptive statistics and group comparisons in SPSS & Excel	

Survey Method

We developed a student survey with 23 questions, with an average completion time of 17:51 minutes. Following demographic and program information, incoming and current students were routed through two slightly different question paths. To reach students, we contacted the program managers whose emails we could find online from the Erasmus Mundus programs listed on the EACEA website as of May 2020. Several program managers responded to us they emailed it to their students. We also conducted social media outreach in group forums and through individual messages on LinkedIn and Facebook, and to a lesser extent on Twitter. Last, the Erasmus Mundus Association shared a post about our survey across their social media channels. Because of the nature of spreading the survey through various channels, we cannot accurately report a response rate. The survey contained mainly closed questions, primarily using rating scales. A few open-ended questions provided space for detailed responses, including completely open-ended questions in which students could elaborate on issues related to or going beyond the survey questions, as they saw fit. The responses characterized a sample of the population during a critical and narrow time period. The country breakdown of survey respondents is relatively comparable to the representation in Erasmus Mundus. However, representation across individual countries is

imperfect. We used Typeform to disseminate the survey, which showed that the survey was viewed 1,820 times, and attempted (opened) 1,113 times, leaving the platform-based completion rate (attempted versus completed on the Typeform platform) at 59.1%. In total, 658 usable, complete survey responses were collected. Survey data was cleaned and analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS and Excel.

Interview Method

We developed an interview guide for program managers that included 27 possible, semi-structured questions. The questions revolved around the following three thematic groups: program response to the COVID-19 outbreak (broken down further into two subcategories of consortium and student response); program preparedness for emergency situations; program planning in light of experiences and lessons learned post-COVID-19. We used the same email in which we asked program managers to disseminate the survey to ask if they would volunteer to interview with us. We reviewed who had volunteered against the geographical distribution of coordinating HEI and used stratified sampling to target programs for a second round of invitations to interview. For the convenience sampling, there is a high risk that our sample of program managers is biased. In total, 12 program managers from 8 countries (based on the location of the coordinating HEI) were interviewed. The interviews lasted on average 1 hour, ranging between 50 minutes and 90 minutes. Interviews were analyzed deductively using atlas.ti, allowing for themes to arise from the data.

We conducted all interviews in English, and the survey was in English as well. To safeguard reliability, both researchers analyzed both data sets.

Limitations

It is important to note this study is limited for a variety of reasons. We did not have direct access to all incoming and current Erasmus Mundus students and therefore needed to rely on self-selection of survey respondents, which always involves a certain amount of selection bias. This could mean that students use the survey to express their strong feelings (positive or negative) about their experiences, which may affect the study's results. Concurrently and as previously mentioned, by relying on program managers' willingness and time to interview with us, selection bias is a concern. To conclude, this research offers a snapshot of a selection of students' and program managers' experiences during summer 2020 after the COVID-19 outbreak and corresponding lockdowns, but neither the survey results nor the interview findings should be understood as representative accounts.

Research Value

In the current situation, understanding Erasmus Mundus participant experiences and views of the impact the COVID-19 crisis has had on their education program is of immense importance for these programs, but also for the wider international higher education community. Because of its intense mobility scheme, Erasmus Mundus has the potential to set the tone and the standard for dealing with the COVID-19 crisis on a broad scale and become a role model for other mobility programs dealing with emergency response. In our research we aimed to bridge the communication gap between students and program managers, providing an avenue for encouraging an open discourse. This resulted in a survey to explore students' perceived impact on their Erasmus Mundus program participation, and our investigation also explored the experiences and reflections of program managers about the challenges and issues they faced during the COVID-19 crisis. In doing so, this research project will illuminate the experiences of both sides and provide suggestions

for programs, consortia, and participating institutions. As such, results can inform current and near-future planning of Erasmus Mundus programs, but also add to the research base of emergency response in international higher education programming.

Definition of Terms

- **Current Erasmus Mundus Student** (“Current Student”): A student in an Erasmus Mundus program who has already enrolled and commenced studies. Program intake occurred either during 2018 or 2019.
- **Incoming Erasmus Mundus Student** (“Incoming Student”): A student who has been selected to participate in an Erasmus Mundus program with a 2020 intake but has not yet started studies. Some programs postponed because of the pandemic, but we considered incoming students those that were originally selected for the 2020 program intake.
- **Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree (EMJMD)** (“Erasmus Mundus Program”): As defined by the European Commission’s Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree (EMJMD), is a prestigious, integrated, international study program, jointly delivered by an international consortium of higher education institutions.

Results & Findings

This section outlines the results from the student survey and findings from the interviews with program managers. We organized the findings into eight thematic areas: Initial Responses and Housing Issues; Early Adjustments and Decision-Making; Communication and Information; Impact on Degree Requirements and Completion; Mental Health; Travel and Visa Challenges; Development of Support Initiatives; and Overall Student Satisfaction with Program Responses.

Both current and incoming Erasmus Mundus students were invited to participate in the survey. In total, 658 students filled out the survey, with slightly more incoming students (n=383, 58%) participating than current students (n=275, 42%). From all respondents, scholarship recipients made up the majority (n=547, 83%); with self-funded students representing under a quarter of all responses (n=85, 13%) and a few students partially supported by a scholarship rounded out the sample (n=26, 4%). Over 100 countries were represented; in descending order, the top ten nationalities represented were Brazil, India, Mexico, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Philippines, Colombia, Indonesia, and Nepal. These are in line with the overall representation of Erasmus Mundus scholarship recipients in 2018 and 2019 reported by EACEA. Out of the 101 Erasmus Mundus programs listed on the EACEA site as of May 2020, students from 88 of these programs responded to the survey, although the range of respondents per program varied from 1 to 36. Institutions coordinating the programs were located in 21 countries. The top five countries of the coordinating institutions and the number of respondents per country were France (124), Austria (76), Belgium (75), the United Kingdom (63) and Germany (61).

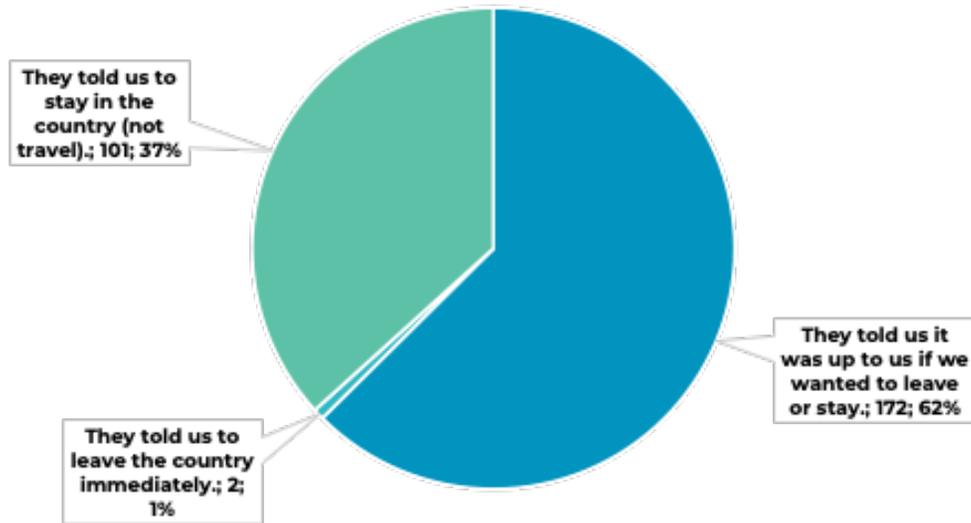
Initial Responses and Housing Issues

Regarding initial program responses to COVID-19, current students were asked to indicate how their program responded to the COVID-19 outbreak after the lockdowns emerged. Figure 1 shows that 62% (n=172) indicated that the program left the decision whether to stay or leave up to the students; 1% (n=2) were told to leave the country immediately, and 37% (n=101) was told to stay in the country and not travel. Figure 2 shows the current status of programs for incoming students as of summer 2020.

FIGURE 1

Initial program response (Current students, n=275)

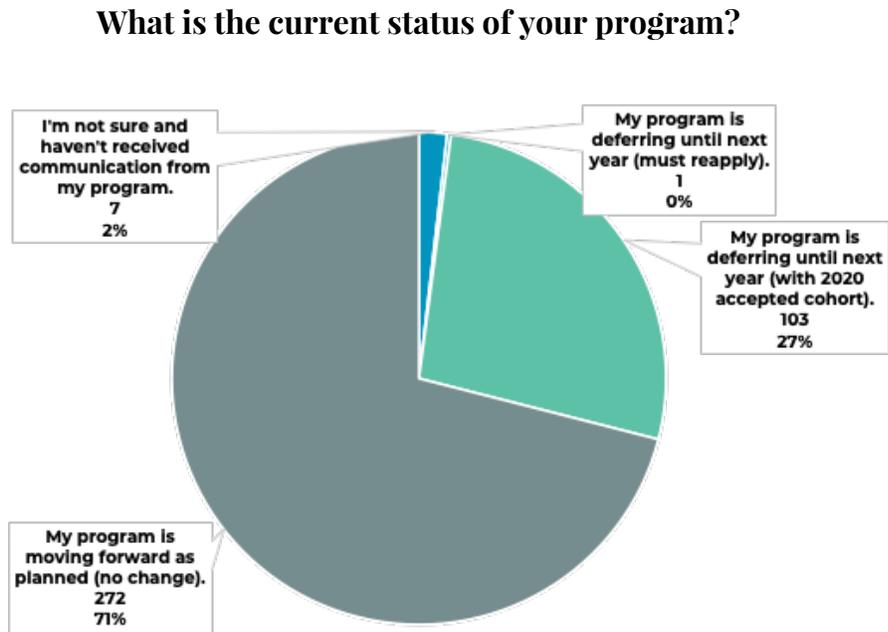
What was your program's initial response to the COVID-19 Outbreak?



As shown in the graph above, 37% of the students (n=101) said their programs advised them to stay where they were, and not go back to their home countries or reallocate to somewhere else. This approach was also present in the interviews with program managers, though most interviewees reported leaving the choice of where to be during the pandemic up to students. One program manager reported that the program advised students not to leave the host country, which allowed them to resume with face to face laboratory classes in May, once restrictions were eased. Having everybody in the host country allowed for the program to include as much direct contact as possible, always adapting to the regulatory changes. This allowed for faster decision making since students would not have to reallocate from their home countries to the host countries every time regulations changed. The program adapted the amount of students present in class according to regulations, but was able to conduct all of the planned laboratory classes for the spring semester of 2020 face to face.

FIGURE 2

Current program status (Incoming students, n=383)

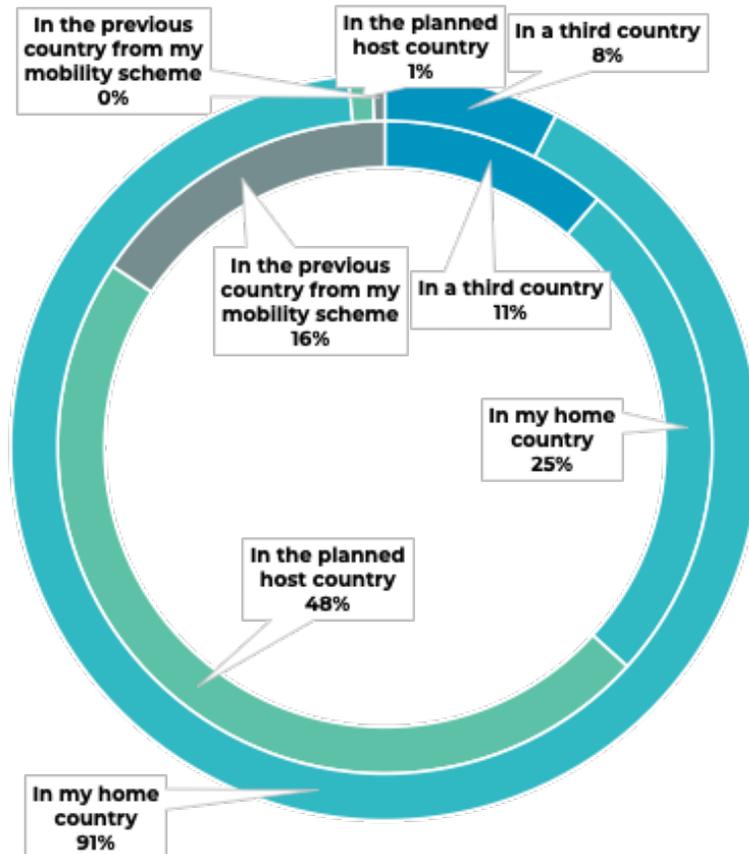


Students were asked a series of questions about their current location and housing situation. Incoming students, many of whom had not begun studies as of June/July 2020, were primarily in their home countries (N=348, 91%). Current students were spread across their home countries (n=70, 25%), planned host countries (n=131, 48%), previous host countries (n=43, 16%) and third countries (n=31, 11%), as shown in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3

Current location of current and incoming students (n=658)

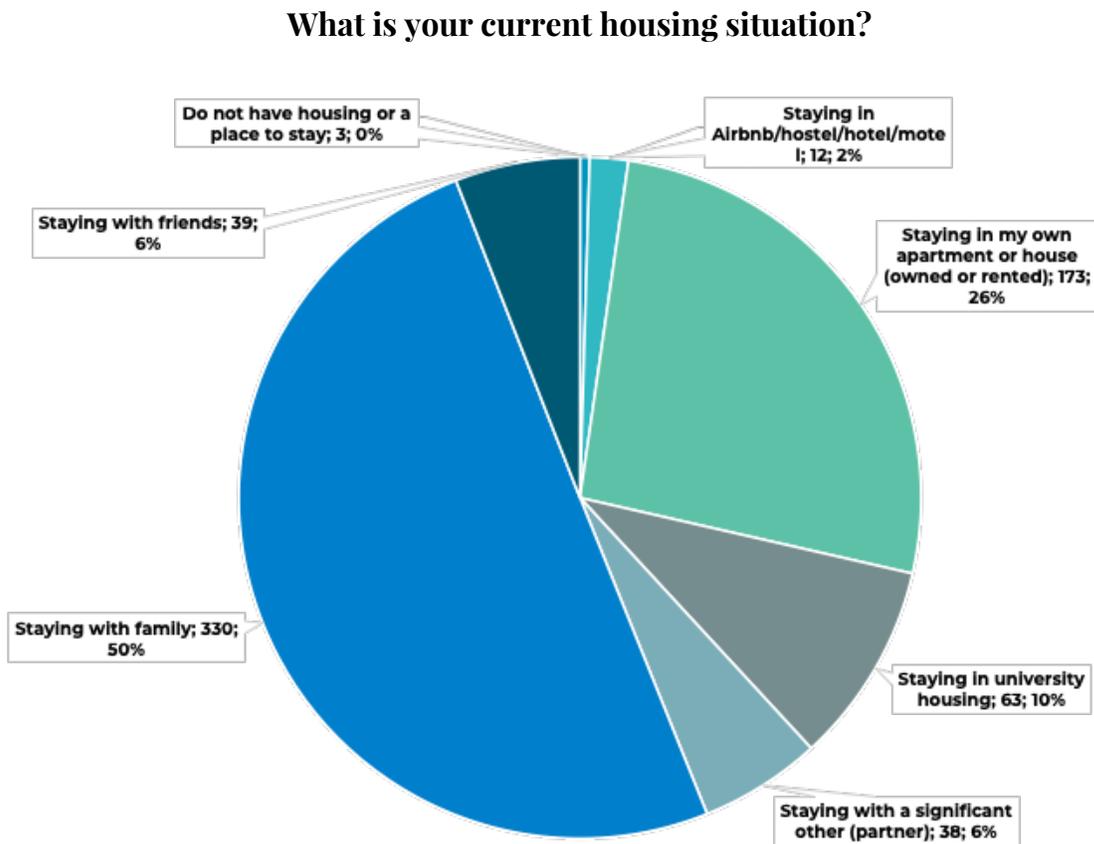
Where are you currently located?
Outer rim: incoming Students; Inner rim: current students



When asked about their current housing situation, incoming students were mainly staying with family (n=274, 72%). Current students were primarily staying in their own rented or owned apartments or houses (n=108, 39%), followed by staying with family (n=58, 21%). The cumulative housing situation of all students can be seen in figure 4.

FIGURE 4

Current housing situation (All students, n=658)



Students were asked which issues they encountered with housing and if their housing was an affordable option. Regarding the affordability of housing, a majority of students (n=545, 83%) indicated that their current living situation was affordable, 45 (7%) said it was not affordable housing, and 68 (10%) were unsure about the affordability of their housing.

Although 51% of students reported not having issues with housing (n=334), 49% of students did check one issue related to housing (n=324) as is shown in figure 5. Common issues with housing that were reported included loneliness/having to live alone; living with persons suffering from anxiety and depression, privacy, and cleanliness:

“Another thing that I concern a lot about is accommodation. The student residence I could get is a double room and I'm afraid that it would cause difficulties if self-quarantine is needed.”

¹ Some direct quotes have been edited to enhance readability and preserve the anonymity of participants.

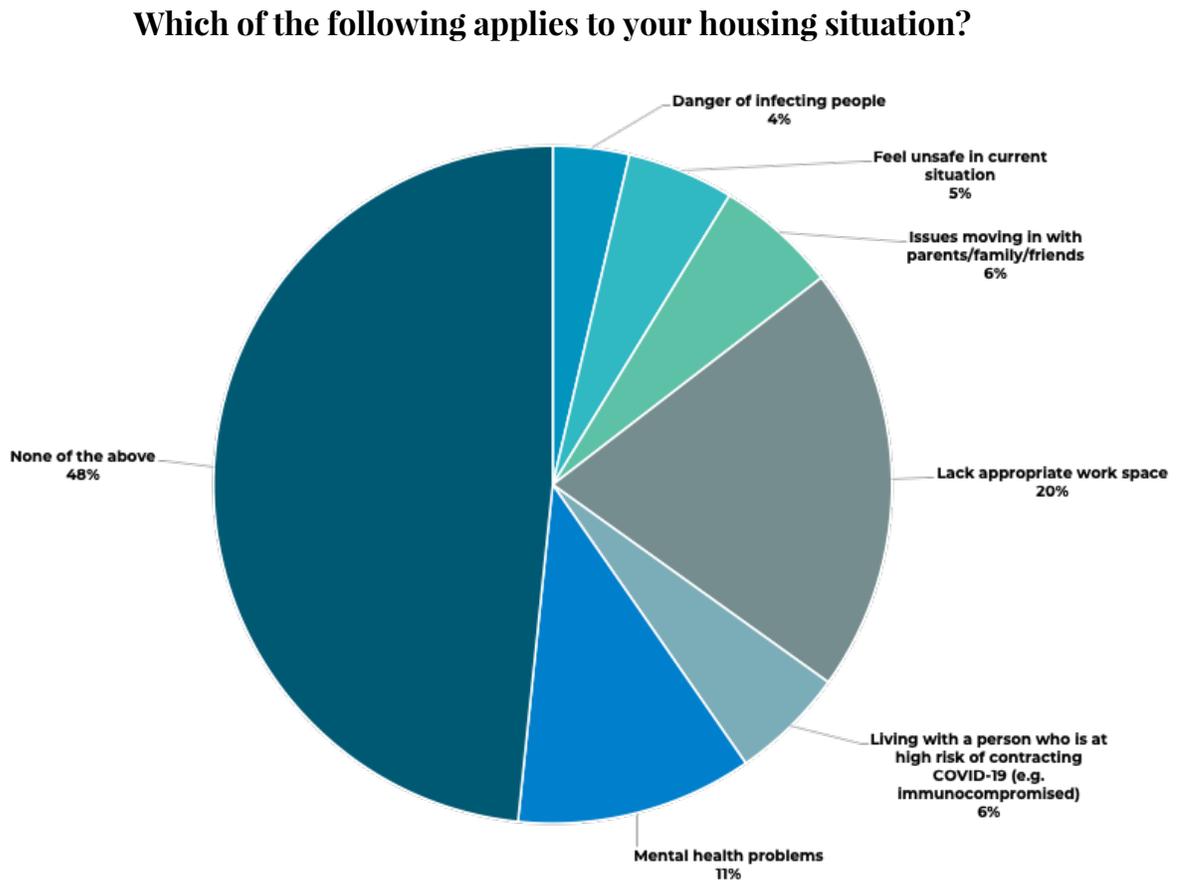
Additionally, financial concerns were brought up frequently, mostly related to the changing of schedule in the programs, with an example being having to pay two rents at a time due to inability to move to next host country:

“Housing has been a big problem as I have to book housing and pay rent in Denmark even though I am unsure when I will reach there given my country's situation.”

This concern was recognized by program managers, with one of them mentioning the challenge of finding accommodation for incoming students that, due to COVID-19 would arrive in the host countries in the middle of the academic semester. This program manager reported making efforts to negotiate with student accommodations that usually charge students for the full semester, to allow incoming students to pay only for the months they would actually be using the accommodation.

FIGURE 5

Issues with housing situation (All students, n=658)



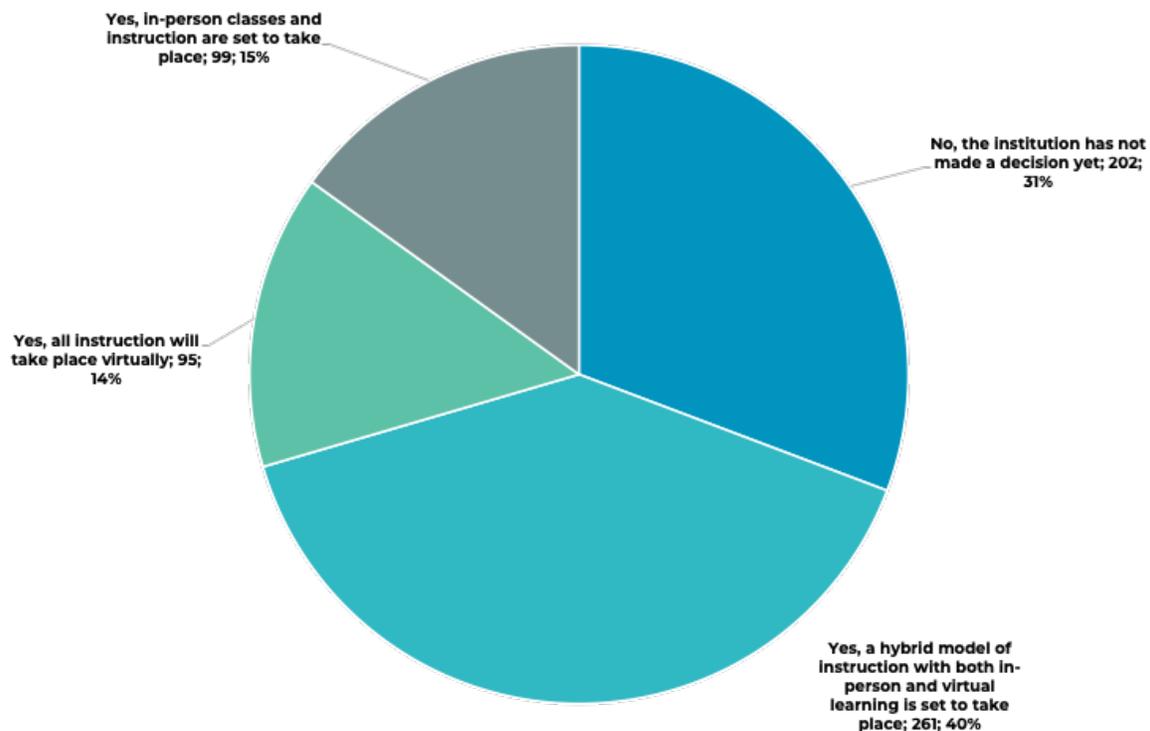
Early Adjustments and Decision-Making

As of June/July 2020, 40% of programs had decided on a hybrid model of instruction for the Fall 2020 semester. However, over a third had not yet made a decision, or had not yet informed students of their decision. Roughly a quarter each decided on full virtual instruction or full in-person classes.

FIGURE 6

Decision on Fall 2020 Teaching Mode (All students, n=658)

Has your program made a decision on the mode of teaching for fall 2020?



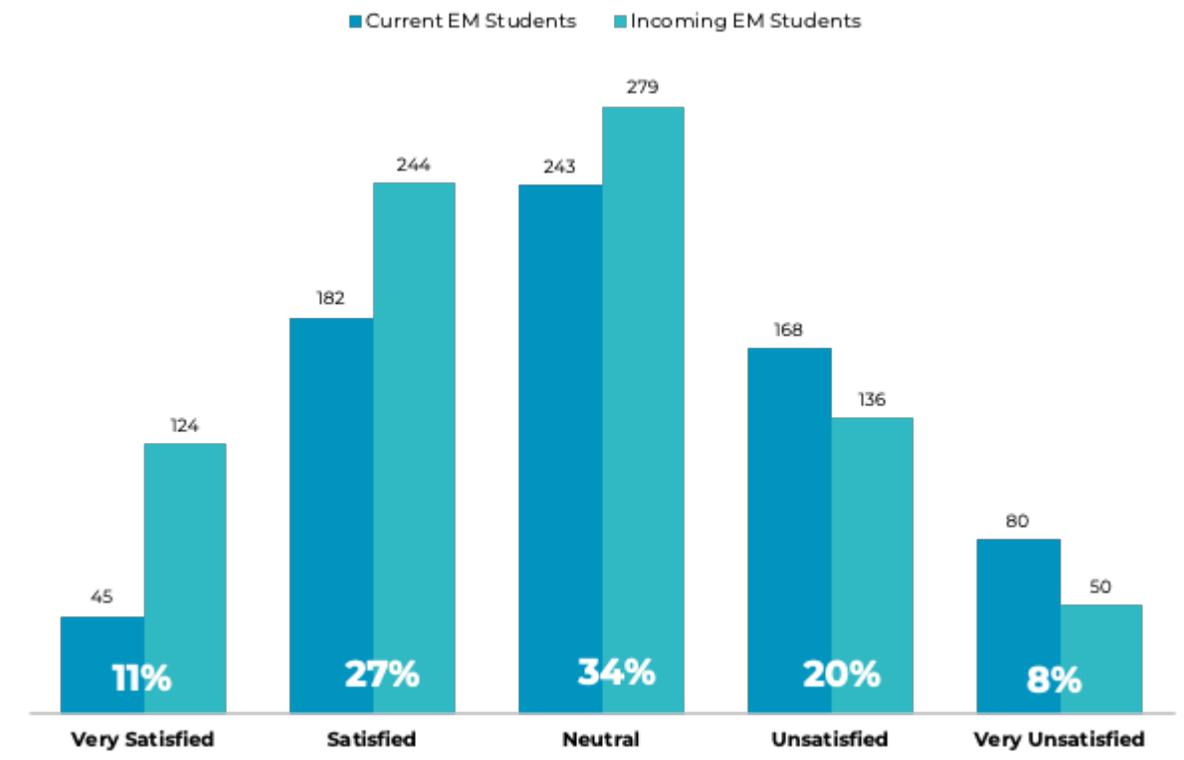
Program managers reported the difficulties of decision making during these times, which include the uncertainty of how the situation will progress, and the uncertainty of what the programs were allowed to do, considering university regulations as well as EACEA regulations. 7 of the 12 interviewees reported that having to wait for permission to make decisions was one of the challenges of managing EMJMD during these times. The programs had to wait for permission to, for example, postpone programs or to tell students whether they would still receive their scholarships if they were back, or still, at their home countries. Managers mostly recognized, however, that their universities and EACEA were also facing many difficulties, and doing what was in their power to ease the situation for the programs.

The rapidly changing situation of COVID-19 was also very challenging to program decision making, and some programs that tried to do face to face activities during the summer and fall were forced to change plans last minute and go back to online teaching.

FIGURE 7

Student satisfaction with the decision-making process (All students, n=658)

How satisfied were you with your program's decision-making process?



Students also reported a desire that the programs made earlier decisions (n=24): **“I think the university I’ll go to should have informed us way earlier in terms of how lectures will be delivered. On July 7th we still don’t have an answer to this.”** Similarly, another student reported:

“Our next destination has not sent any news yet, and we are supposed to get there in a month.”

When asked to describe how the current situation affected them, 48 students reported feeling significantly harmed by the late decision making of their programs, and 58 students reported being

affected by the uncertainty about the near future of their program, related to mobility but also to mode of teaching and the continuity of the programs or scholarships:

“Due to their lack of decision making, I felt completely stuck and could not make plans of returning home for fear of putting the completion of my degree at risk”.

The incoming students were particularly harmed by late decision-making when their programs reported the postponing of the cohort (n=35) after many had already arranged to begin their programs in 2020:

“I had already quit my job when they informed us about the program being postponed, so it was quite a blow to me.”

“I was supposed to have a scholarship and start EM in September 2020, and my work contract ends in July. My company had already managed to hire someone to replace me, so they couldn't afford to keep me. And I haven't start looking for a new job until very recently, when I received the news that the EM was postponed.”

From the program manager's perspective, making earlier decisions was often a challenge, especially since in the first months of the pandemic, programs were still understanding how much flexibility they would get both from EACEA and their own universities: **“These programs a very good in that there is a lot of freedom in managing, but there are still many constraints and sometimes you still don't know if you can make a decision, especially when it comes to paying something”**. After some important decisions were made by the EACEA, most program managers (n=7) reported being satisfied with the level of flexibility and freedom given to the programs.

Managers also reported that making decisions during the pandemic was hard because of the uncertainty of the current and future scenarios: **“Normally we have an annual meeting and that was supposed to happen physically. For some time it looked like by June this should be over so we were still thinking it could take place. Making the decision to give up a normal plan was hard. At some point we did make a decision just to have a certainty.”**

The changing scenarios on the fall semester were also a concern of students because they were afraid their programs did not have well defined alternative solutions if the COVID pandemic developed differently than expected:

“Rather than saying ‘depending on public health guidance’ giving examples of what will be done if this or that sanitary measure is in place”

“They hope to make it face to face, but are not sure. And it leaves me uncertain. I hope they have alternate plans at the ready and aren't caught off guard if a second lockdown happens.”

Communication and Information

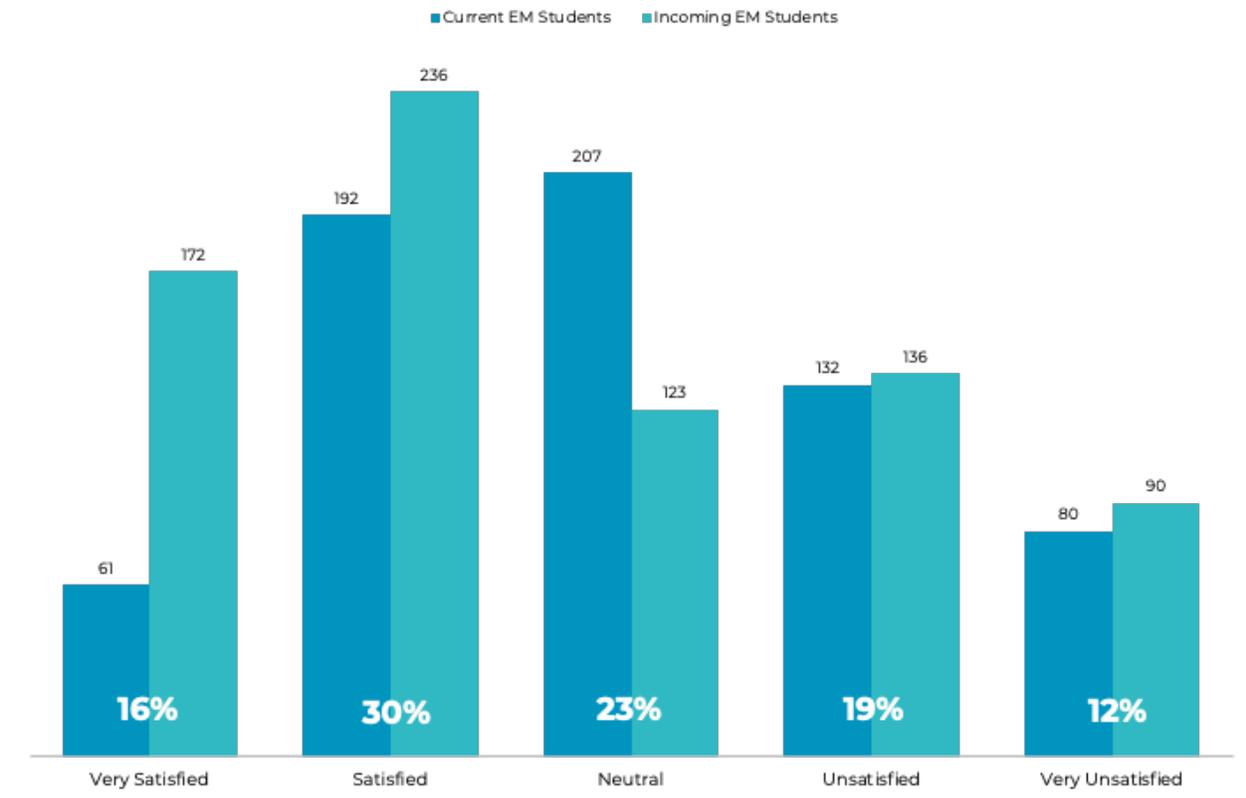
Program communication was the most frequently cited topic when students were asked what could their programs have done better. 116 students said they wanted more frequent communication from their programs:

“I believe that they should strive for more transparency about the internal procedures going on because there were huge periods of no communication and this scenario left us (students) really anxious about our future plans.”

FIGURE 8

Satisfaction with program communication (All students, n=658)

How satisfied were you with your program’s communication?



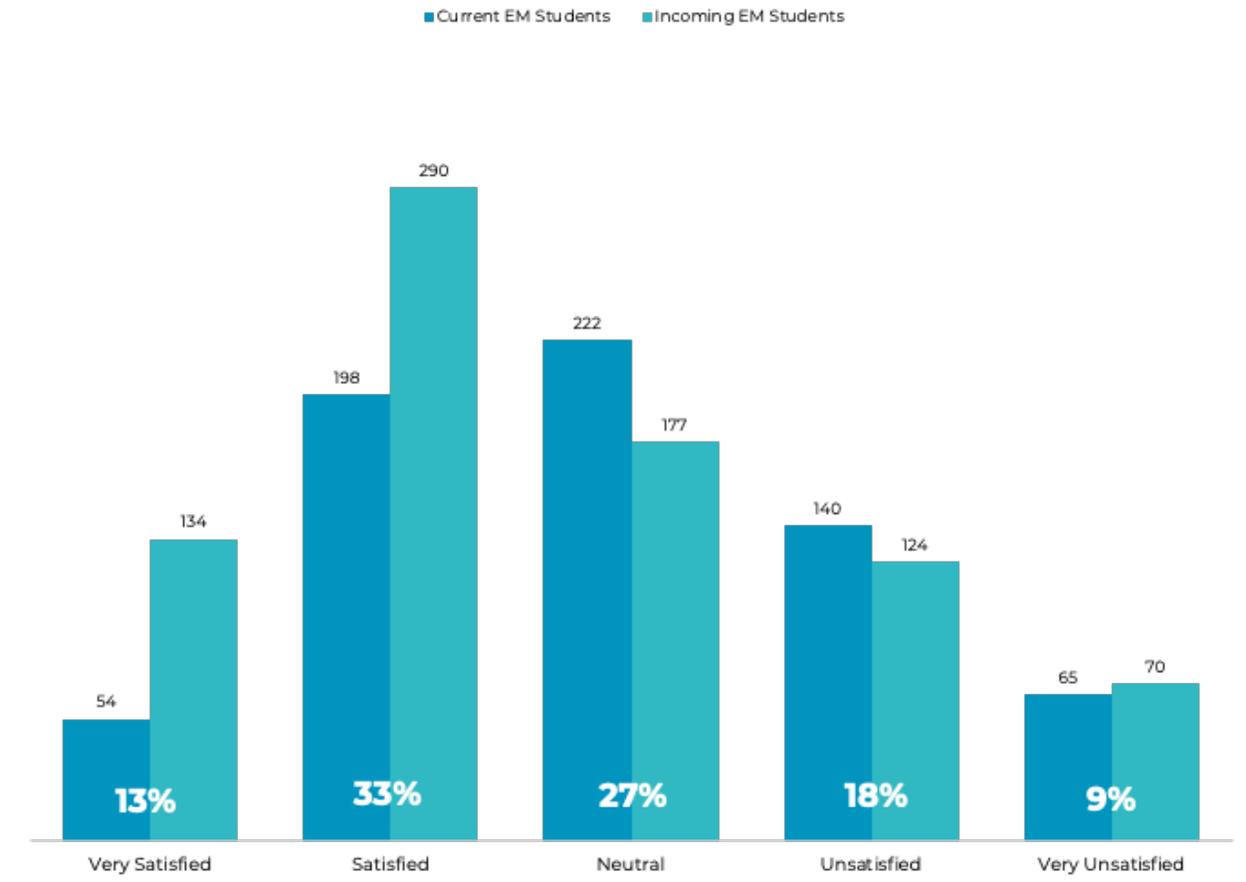
Additionally, 32 students desired more COVID specific information: **“As a non-EU student, help to navigate healthcare systems so that way we can understand how to get access to counseling, possible testing”**. Other frequent suggestions on communication involved the

programs giving clear, coherent information, and fast responses “**even if it is to say that they are in the process of discussing how the situation will be handled**”.

FIGURE 9

Satisfaction with information received from the program (All students, n=658)

How satisfied were you with the information received from your program?



Impact on Degree Requirements and Completion

Following this, students (n=38) expressed concern about the ability of their programs to move online and how this would impact their inherently onsite, intercultural EM experience, but also their ability to fulfill program requirements. The master theses were one of the components affected by the pandemic: “**My program understandably suspended all human data collection, such as interviews and field works. The prohibition of doing interviews even online (in order not to generate undue stress on the interviewees) gravely impacted the dissertations of a big part of the cohort.**” Besides the inability to conduct or complete field or laboratory work, students also reported their thesis process was more difficult in isolation: “**The thing I struggled the most**

with was that I had to write my thesis in isolation. Not being able to study in a shared space or to exchange a word with anyone was very hard.”

The online experiences, while understandably necessary, left students disappointed at the missed components of their degree:

“It has also been a lonely study period, not what I had anticipated when I enrolled into the program. The interesting interactions of a class set up, getting to learn from others, their different perspectives, indulging in different cultures, which is what makes EM peculiar has been cut short”.

The online activities themselves were also not always satisfactory, and 43 students reported feeling uneasy about the quality of teaching. Another 21 students reported being uncomfortable with the workload, that either increased during the pandemic, or was not sensitive to the affects the pandemic had on the wellbeing and productivity of the students: **“Personally my problem was about my efficiency at online courses which I don` t think it was high and the workload was still a lot to handle with psychological ups and downs and uncertainty”**. Students desired more flexibility and support on academic requirements: **“Ease down workload during such times as personally there was a bit of mental stress dealing with the situation itself and coursework.”**

“The COVID measures coupled to non-stop assignments and classes in X put me in a state of high anxiety I had not previously experienced. I was able to complete all educational activities well, but felt very overwhelmed.”

Additionally, students expressed concern about the pandemic on their financial situation (n=42), including how they could continue to pay the program (self-funded students). These concerns were further intensified by the discontent raised on the quality of the online teaching and the missed components of their degrees:

“I am unable to travel to my country of study. As a self-funding student, I have paid the full cost of attending already, but I will not benefit from everything I have paid for”.

A further student commented: **“They should propose a reduction of tuition fees in recognition of the loss of several elements of our program”**.

“I wish my program would support self-funding students by providing fee reduction and relocating future scholarships to current students who are in trouble. I find it hard to understand how they decided to welcome # new scholarship students when # of us presented several letters explaining the difficult financial situation we are in and asking for assistance.”

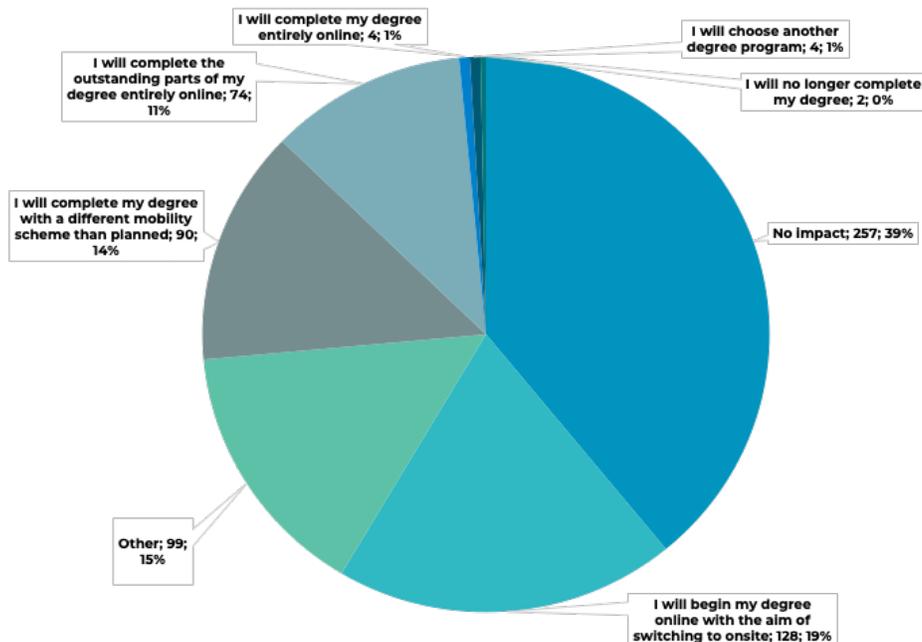
Despite these challenges, 95% of students said that they were still planning to complete their Erasmus Mundus program amid the circumstances brought on by COVID-19. A mere 2 (<1%) students firmly answered that they were not planning on completing their EM program, both of which were incoming students. 30 students (circa 4%) were unsure if they would complete their degree (current: n= 5; incoming: n= 25).

As shown in figure 10, a further question posed investigated how the COVID-19 outbreak would impact getting the Erasmus Mundus degree in regard to the mode of completion (online, onsite, hybrid, different mobility scheme). Most student mobility schemes will change because of COVID-19. 399 students (66,5%) noted that they will experience restricted mobility due to COVID-19 in the form of online versus onsite degree components. Despite this, 39% of students did not feel like COVID was going to impact getting their degree in any way.

FIGURE 10

Impact of COVID-19 on Degree – Mode of Completion (All students, n=658)

How is the COVID-19 outbreak going to impact getting your degree?



Travel and Visa Challenges

Dealing with travel restrictions and closed embassies was the most frequently cited challenge by program managers (n=10). Similarly, students frequently reported wishing their programs would manage visa applications and mobility better during the pandemic (n=42). Moreover, in the separate open-ended part of the survey, both current and incoming students noted facing significant challenges with visa and travel restrictions (n=68) due to the pandemic. Student difficulties with travel restrictions were present both for incoming and current students. Incoming students were overall concerned about not being able to get to the country of destination or even to apply for visas due to closed embassies or the need to travel to another country to get the visa they need. In general, they wished for more support for getting their first visa during the pandemic: **“The thing I needed most was an official letter advocating for me to come for my studies. This would give me a better chance in my application for travel ban exemption.”** Current students were mainly concerned about expiring visas, and not being able to obtain visas for their next destination. Some concluding students had their graduations or theses defenses postponed, which affected the legality of their stay in Europe: **“I would have liked help regarding visa process as they rescheduled the thesis defense affects the legality of my stay in EU”**.

Mental Health

The effects of the pandemic on Erasmus Mundus students go well beyond objective difficulties in mobility or in financing their studies. 95 respondents reported mental health concerns such as anxiety, stress, loneliness and depression. Some of the challenges already mentioned in this report usually triggered those concerns, such as financial burdens, excessive workload or difficulty with studies and the inherent uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, students are facing particularly straining challenges during the pandemic, since most of them are or will be away from their home countries, family and friends: **“I felt a little anxious. I was a little depressed and was feeling lonely. I want to finish my thesis satisfactorily so that I can visit my family.”**

“I was generally very demotivated for my studies. Often lonely, worried about family, and generally just tired.”

Some students felt that the feeling of loneliness and anxiety could have been reduced had their programs organized specific support measures considering the mental burden of the pandemic. 15 students wished for professional mental health support: **“I wish they had a number of mental health experts clearly communicated.”** And 14 students asked for more moments of interaction and group chats: **“A webinar or a coffee chat online would have been appreciated for morale.”**

Frequently, students felt that program managers and professors were not considering that students took a hard hit on their wellbeing and mental health. They expressed that the programs could have demonstrated more empathy and understanding:

“I feel that they are not considering the amount of stress we experience from Covid and total lockdown.”

“It would be better if they considered the voices of students and were flexible enough during this pandemic because most of us are highly affected and have very bad emotional state currently”

“I wish they were more supportive on the students side. Understand the impact of corona on our mental health, productivity and studies.”

However, while students wished for more support and understanding from their programmes regarding the mental burdens of the pandemic, 4 program managers also reported being mentally tired and affected by the pandemic. They mentioned the challenges of working from home, both from a pragmatic perspective of difficult communication with colleagues, and from the mental health perspective of dealing with family and an increased amount of work that came from the need for change and adaptation due to COVID.

Development of Support Initiatives

Over half of the respondents (n=139, 51%) indicated that their programs did not develop any additional support measures during this time. 120 respondents (44%) indicated that their program developed additional support measures and 14 (5%) noted that the program did not provide additional support, but the university they were currently at did. The most frequently mentioned support measures as shown in figure 11 were related to creating moments for interaction, involving group chats and other activities with the students:

“We had weekly online meetings to talk about how we were doing, we had a pub quiz, and watch/read articles and then met for a discussions on topics within the program but not on the semesters’s syllabus.”

“We had an open forum to discuss our challenges and insecurities concerning the program.”

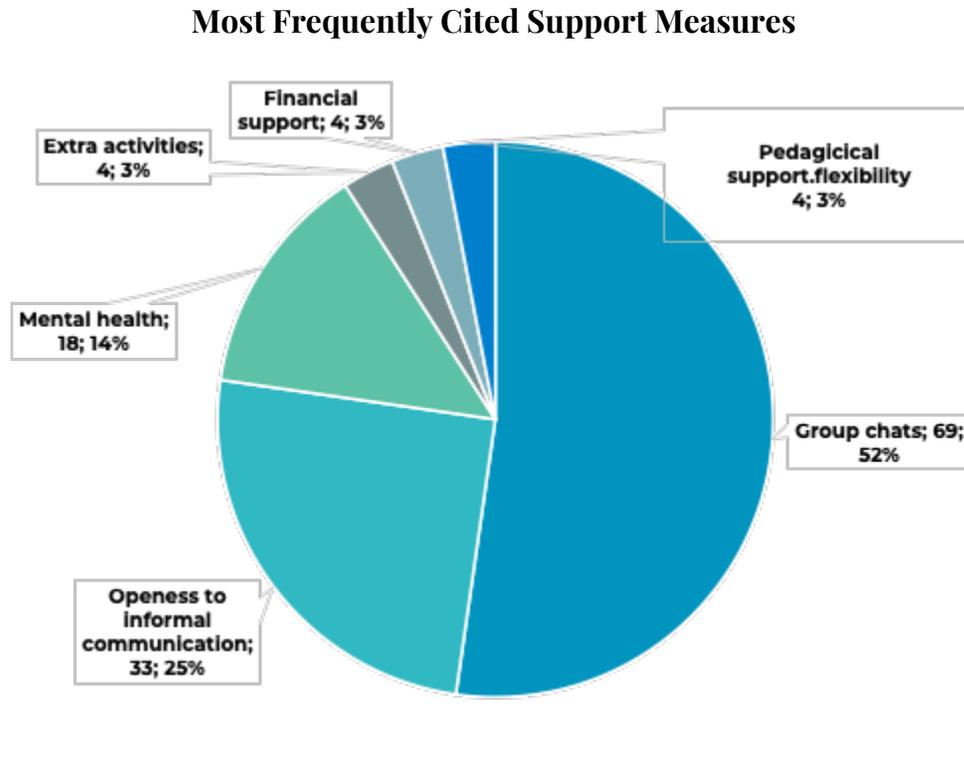
An openness to informal communication by the program managers followed this, for example, by communicating to students that they can reach out if they need to talk about what they are going through. Other support measures focused on mental health, financial support, and flexibility with pedagogical support:

“They connected us with mental health services in our respective host country universities”
“We were informed of the mental health services offered by the University * as well as the availability of the emergency fund”.

“Furthermore, all the professors from the hosting university were flexible and helpful in both adjusting the program and supporting us.”

FIGURE 11

Most frequently cited support measures initiated by programs for students due to COVID-19 (All students, n=658)



Many program managers were taxed with handling the needs of a variety of groups: scholarship holders, self-paying students, 2020 award grantees, and prospective students. In addition, some were managing concurrent cohorts, adding to the complexity of program management. In interviews, the program managers were asked which initiatives were created in response to challenging situations brought on by the COVID-19 outbreak. All ten began more intensive communication via chat sessions or other means. Six programs catered to individual student needs or created individual solutions and/or providing flexibility with exams and courses. Finally, single programs offered extra financial aid, invited more guest speakers for virtual sessions, and connected students directly to employers. One program advocated strongly at the host institution for getting priority for in-person lectures, as their program was beginning for the first cohort during fall 2020.

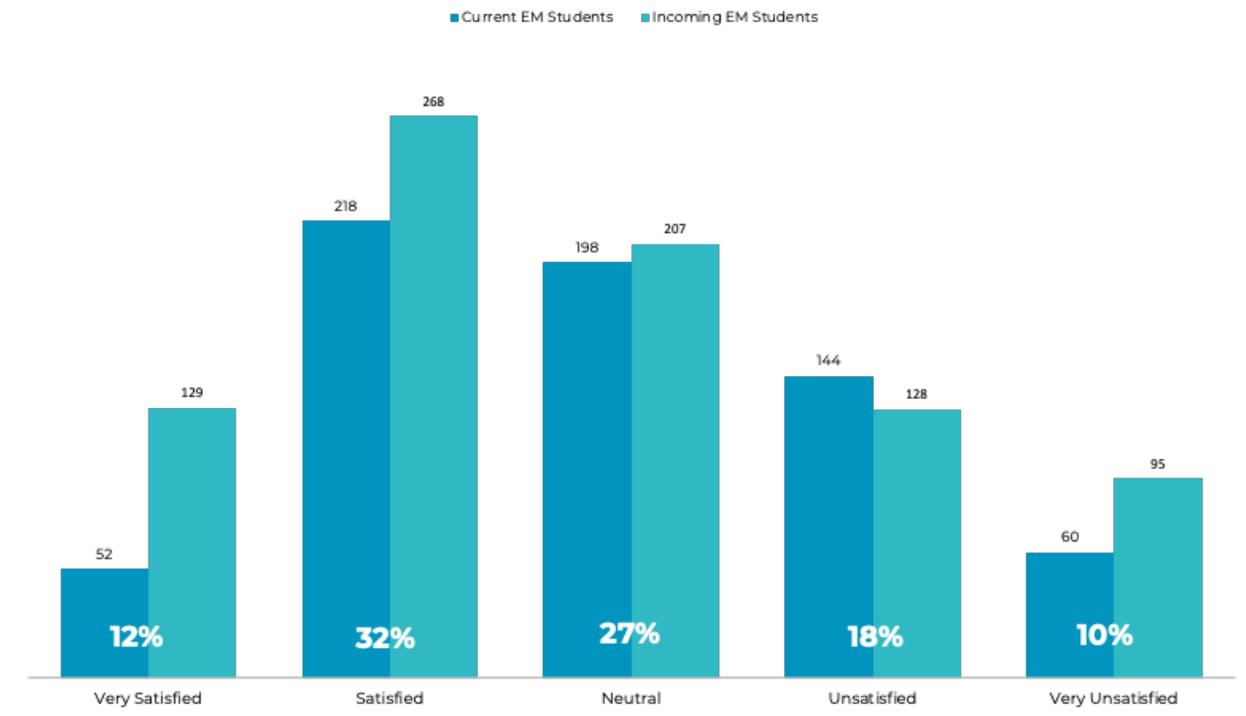
Overall Student Satisfaction with Program Responses

Students were asked to indicate their satisfaction with the program's response overall. Figure 12 shows the overall breakdown between current and incoming student responses. Incoming students were notably more satisfied overall with program response and decision-making.

FIGURE 12

Satisfaction with program's overall response to COVID-19 (All students, n=658)

How satisfied were you with your program's overall response to COVID-19?



In the survey's final open-ended comment area, the main reported concern was program response and organization (n=125). This included program communication, organization, response, and support, but also the ability to complete the program as planned. One of the more commonly mentioned topics was involving students in the decision-making process (n=20): "Some program asked for students opinions about whether or not to continue the program this year. I hope student voice could be taken into decision making."

A few students expressed being thankful to their programs, coordinators, universities for the support they received (n=18). This also included gratefulness to the central EU coordination of EM programs: "Just want to say that in general I am very satisfied with the program and its response to the difficulties related to online education and other. I am especially grateful that students, who were forcefully locked in their home countries are still paid a scholarship, which helps them to cover the expensive rent of student apartments, which otherwise they wouldn't be able to cover. This gives a positive impression that Erasmus Mundus is a reliable and socially responsible program." However, in other cases, students exposed the grave misdoings of other programs:

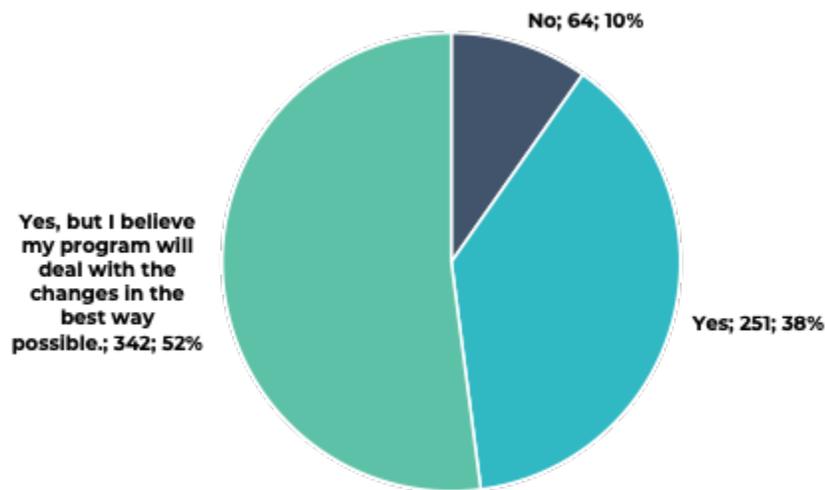
“The X program administration has in effect made the student agreement that was signed by all parties null and void, favoring the situation of the X admin and not in support of the students. (...) There has been little to no flexibility on behalf of the X program to support and accommodate the needs of self-funding students during a global pandemic and impending economic crisis. All in all, this program has been a constant source of frustration and disappointment.”

Figure 13 demonstrates that both current and incoming students reported feeling anxious about the impact of COVID-19 on their program, but felt that the program would deal with the changes in the best way possible (n=342, 52%). Concurrently, 251 (38%) students indicated that they were anxious about the program response and a mere 64 (10%) did not feel anxious about the possible effects. This demonstrates that roughly half of students felt confident in how their Erasmus Mundus programs would respond.

FIGURE 13

Anxiety about the possible effects of COVID-19 on Erasmus Mundus program (All students, n=658)

Do you feel anxious about the possible effects of COVID-19 on your program?

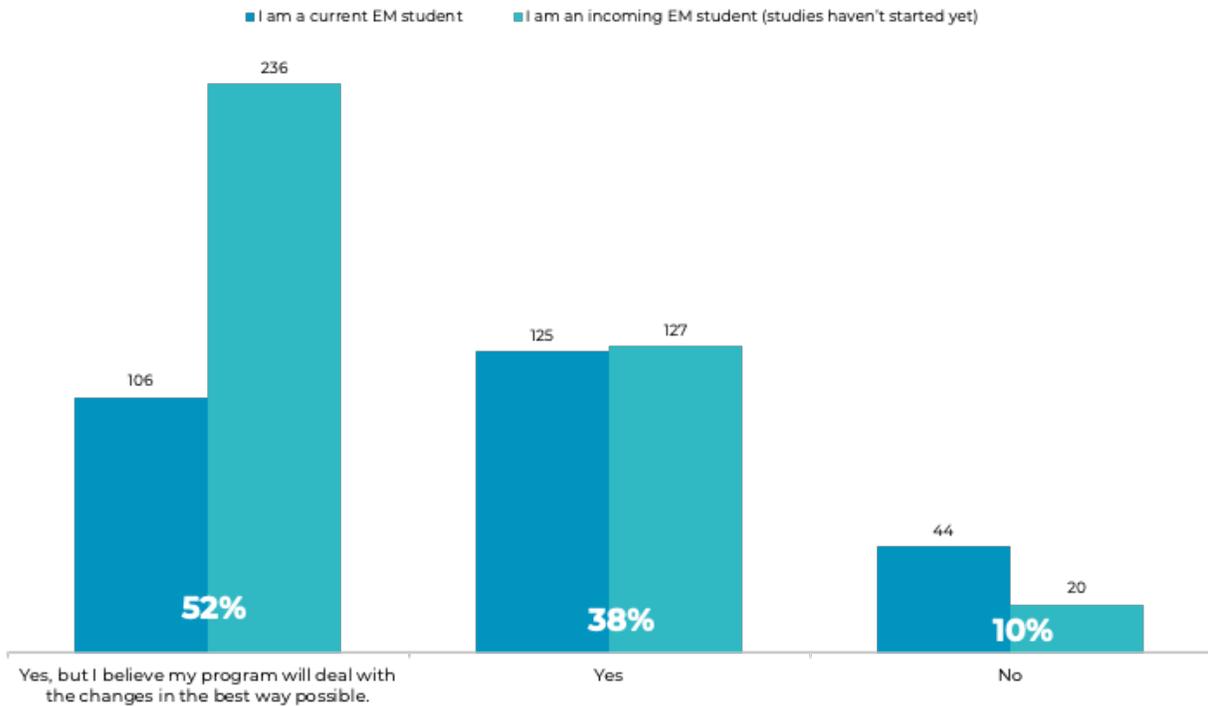


However, because over three quarters chose to be nervous but not the option that they were nervous and felt comfortable with the possible program response, this should be interpreted with caution. When broken down by incoming and current students as in figure 14, we see that incoming students are notably more confident in program response than current students.

FIGURE 14

Anxiety about the possible effects of COVID-19 on Erasmus Mundus program – difference between incoming and current students (All students, n=658)

Do you feel anxious about the possible effects of COVID-19 on your program?



One final challenge of program managers in handling this situation, was that they were not always aware of what other programs were doing, and how other managers were coping with the situation. 3 program managers reported how they would have appreciated being connected with other EMJMD managers to exchange information and report on good practices, for example. Inspired by this challenge, we decided to include in this report one selected case of EMJMD good practice during the pandemic.

COVID-19 Response Good Practice Example

ERASMUS MUNDUS JOURNALISM (EMMA)

www.mundusjournalism.com

The Erasmus Mundus Journalism program has been running since 2005 and is supported by a consortium of three degree-awarding partners; 7 credit-awarding partners as well as media partners. The EMMA program boasts a strong network of 1000 alumni from 110 different countries. Each cohort intake has around 50-90 students, balanced between EU and non-EU students. During the pandemic outbreak, EMMA was working with 82 graduating students; 63 second semester students and 53 new students arriving to Denmark.

The EMMA program intentionally designed their response to changes brought on by the pandemic and mobility restrictions. The guiding principles for all actions was three-pronged and consisted of being transparent, trustworthy, and timely. Beyond these guiding principles, the program purposely set goals for the incoming cohorts despite the circumstances, and these were to 1) get as many students as possible, safely, to Denmark for course start and 2) integrate and support students unable to arrive. This goal was accomplished through targeted measure prior to the course beginning (pre-study period) and after the course had begun (study period).

In the pre-study period, EMMA provided information about course organization and flexible options, and maintained clear and consistent communication about the changing situation. Newsletters were sent about the COVID-19 situation alongside strategies and decisions, as well as explanations for decisions. If the program did not have full or complete information, they transparently communicated this to students and would notify them the newsletter would be sent a few days later once a government decision had been made and they had a better idea of what the changes would mean for the program. Effort was made to be non-alarmist and thus empathetic to already overburdened news cycle, so that students were not viewing the newsletters as extra noise, but rather as helpful guidance for planning their arrival or study period.

For students still deciding to come, EMMA reassured that it would be possible to participate both offline and online, and for self-paying students the program created flexible deadlines and extra support for the tuition payments, housing, travel plans and arrival. In addition, each student was contact individually and continually through personal communication, during which EMMA administrators learned about each specific situation and was able to provide individualized guidance. A spreadsheet was kept tracking students' experience with online learning to use for instructors designing their courses, as well as where the students were and what the situation was in their area. A few months prior to course start, students were connected with others in their area to start arranging regional groups, which helped to facilitate integration and a feeling of community.

In the study period, clear and transparent communication continued on a daily basis in common avenues such as email and Facebook groups, with students using WhatsApp. Moreover, each student arriving after course start or identified as in a vulnerable situation was offered a 1-on-1 meeting to support their acclimation.

A study culture workshop was organized for staff, students, and alumni with focus on online learning, and classes used small working groups consisted of onsite and online students to ensure integration regardless of location. In addition to recording lectures for students across time zones, special sessions with lecturers were organized every week as an open forum for questions, student engagement and to ensure learning quality. In a sense, this was to help recreate, if even a little, the informal conversations that would normally transpire before or after class in an onsite environment.

Alongside these measures for students, EMMA opened up online guest lectures to alumni as well to facilitate conversations between guests, faculty, students and alumni, and play a supportive role in alumni career development during a difficult time. Students and alumni also came together to write about their experiences with COVID-19 and how it was shaping the current cohort, share advice and insight, and in general facilitate connections across program cohorts. This was done through journalistic productions, a Blue Book, YouTube productions, Instagram take-overs, and "soul sessions" consisting of poetry, music, films, etc.

The key takeaways from the EMMA response include 1) a coordinated, intentional strategy for dealing with a crisis; 2) in their case the three Ts—which are also transferrable to other programs; and 3) a focus on individualized student support and community building.

Author Information

Jessica D. Schüller

Jessica is a graduate student and Erasmus Mundus fellow in the Research and Innovation in Higher Education (MARIHE) program. She is also a graduate student in the MBA program in Education Management at the University in Oldenburg. She has professional experience in international higher education and her research interests include international, transnational, and rural higher education.

jessica.schuller@tuni.fi

Twitter: @JessSchueller

LinkedIn: jessicaschueller

ORCID: 0000-0001-5568-4495

Flávia Soares De Oliveira Colus

Flávia is a graduate student and Erasmus Mundus fellow in the Research and Innovation in Higher Education (MARIHE) program. She is also a graduate student in Policy for Science and Technology from the University of Campinas in Brazil. Her research interests include global rankings, the role of higher education for development, and access to higher education.

flavia.soaresdeoliveiracolus@tuni.fi

LinkedIn: flaviacolus

ORCID: 0000-0002-0485-7891