

Studying abroad for everyone? Obstacles for international mobility among students in EHEA-countries

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ResearchNed



Since the very initiation of the Bologna Process, decision makers of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have encouraged and stimulated temporary international student mobility (ISM) in its various forms (Eurydice, 2020). International student mobility has proven to be highly valuable for students in gaining the competences needed for personal, educational, and professional development (European Commission, 2023, 2019). Moreover, it helps increase intercultural understanding and foster a common European identity (European Commission, 2023).

Although international student mobility has increased immensely over the last two decades (Hauschildt, 2024; Weber, 2024), not all students have equal access to international mobility opportunities (European Commission et al., 2023). Evidence shows that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds¹ are less likely to participate in such programmes (European Commission, 2019; Hauschildt et al., 2021). Students with fewer opportunities (i.e. those from lower socio-economic backgrounds), therefore, miss out on the benefits that come with studying abroad, further deepening the divide with their peers. While these inequalities are already well-established, we are interested if there are also unequal opportunities for a broader group of students: students that are generally underrepresented in the student population. According to the EHEA, underrepresented students can be defined as those students that are underrepresented in the student population in relation to certain personal or socio-demographic characteristics (such as sex, age, nationality, geographic origin, and socio-economic background) (Annex II to the Rome Communiqué, 2020). This intelligence brief provides insights into the experienced obstacles for temporary enrolment abroad and how they vary between students (with different socio-demographic background characteristics). More specifically, our research questions are:

- To what extent do students experience obstacles for studying temporarily abroad?
- To what extent are there differences in experienced obstacles between students (from different socio-demographic backgrounds)?

Based on the aforementioned research and policy papers, our hypothesis is that students from underrepresented groups (among which those from lower socio-economic backgrounds), are more likely to experience obstacles for studying temporarily abroad.

This analysis is based on the EUROSTUDENT 8 Scientific Use File, which contains micro data on students from 16 EHEA-countries (Azerbaijan, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Georgia, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Sweden). We examine four different obstacles for international mobility: practical, social, financial, and motivational obstacles. These obstacles were measured among all students, also those who have not (yet) studied abroad. For more information on the operationalisation of these obstacles, see 'Methodological notes' at the very end of this brief.

¹ Student socio-economic background is defined primarily by parental education levels and occupational/financial status (Hauschildt, 2024).

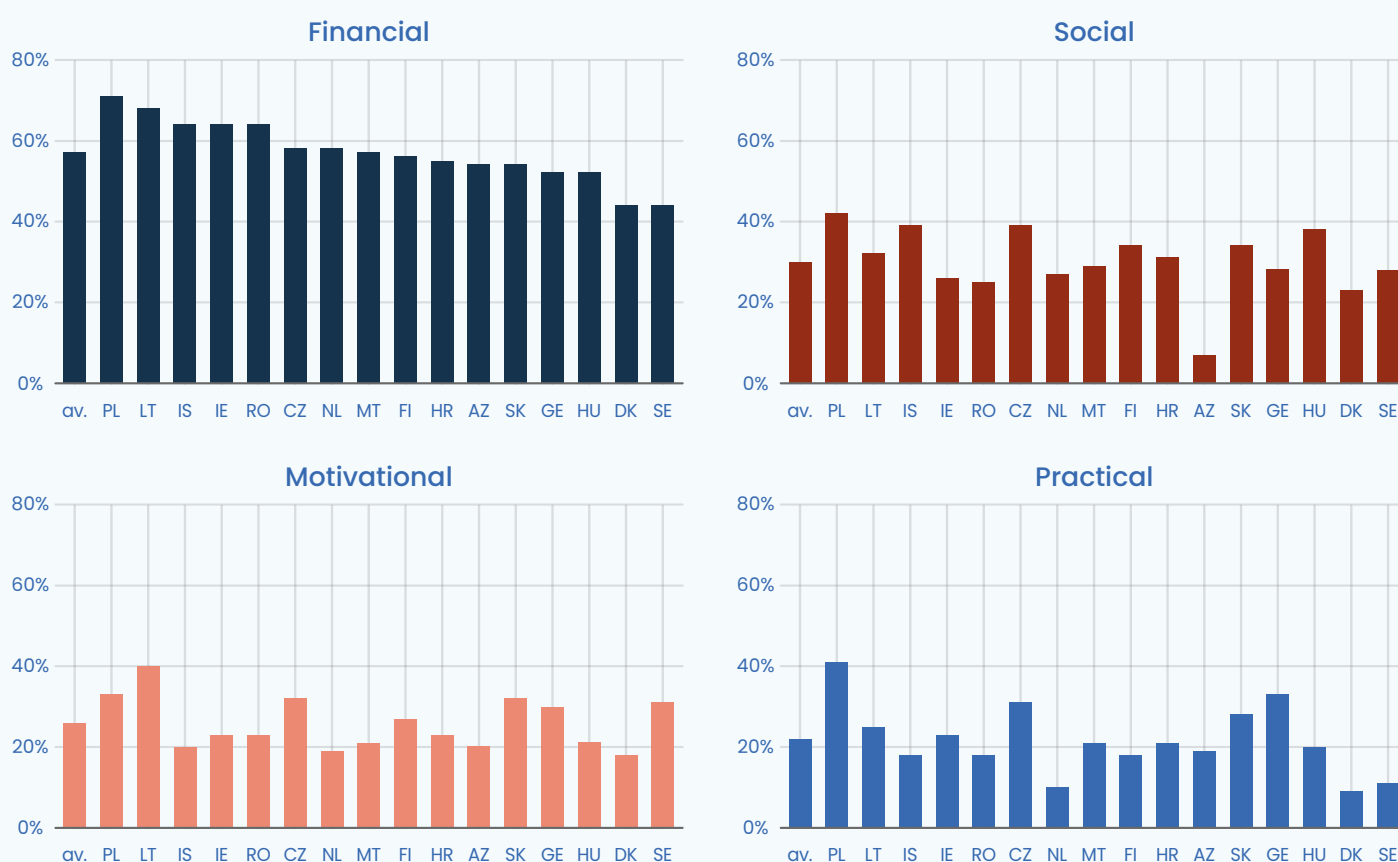
Obstacles for international student mobility

Figure 1 shows the share of students that experience practical, social, financial or motivational obstacles to studying temporarily abroad per country (for examples of the obstacles, see 'Methodological notes' at the very end). On average, students in all countries most often report experiencing financial obstacles for studying abroad (57 %), followed by social (30 %), motivational (26 %) and practical obstacles (22 %).

Each obstacle shows great variation between countries, indicating that country-specific factors may influence students' decisions regarding temporary enrolment abroad. The highest share of financial obstacles can be found in Poland (71 %) and Lithuania (68 %) and the lowest (although still

quite high) in Denmark and Sweden (both 44 %). Social obstacles are most often reported in Poland (42 %), the Czech Republic, and Iceland (both 39%), and least reported in Azerbaijan (7 %) and Denmark (23 %). The highest shares of motivational obstacles are found in Lithuania (40 %) and Poland (33 %), and the lowest in the Netherlands (19 %) and Denmark (18%). Lastly, students from Poland and Georgia (41 % and 33 %) report the highest shares of practical obstacles, whereas students from Denmark and the Netherlands have the lowest shares (9 % and 10 %). These findings indicate that students from different countries vary in the obstacles they experience, which is relevant for policy and decision makers in the countries specifically and the EHEA more generally.

Figure 1. Share of students (%) who report to experience practical, social, financial or motivational obstacles, per country



Data source: EUROSTUDENT 8 SUF (micro data; weighted for national representative samples).

Data collection: Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

EUROSTUDENT question: 5.11 To what extent are or were the following aspects an obstacle to you for enrolment abroad?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, NL.

Differences in obstacles between students

How do the various obstacles for studying abroad vary between different groups of students? Table 1 provides a descriptive overview. As descriptive differences between student groups are mainly found in financial and social obstacles, we will zoom into these two. Female students report financing more often as a hurdle than male students (61 % vs. 52 %). Students from non-tertiary backgrounds² more often experience financial obstacles compared to students with tertiary backgrounds (62 % vs. 54 %). Lastly, students with financially (very) well-off parents are the least to experience financial obstacles compared to

their counterparts with parents that are averagely well-off and those with parents that are not (at all) well-off (44 % vs. 61 % and 75 %, respectively). Social obstacles are more often reported by female students, the oldest student group (30 years and over), and students without a migration background than their counterparts. These findings provide a first glance into social disparities in obstacles for student mobility. The results from here provide further insights into this. The figures below first show how some of these social disparities vary between countries.

Table 1. **Share of experienced obstacles (%) by students' socio-demographic characteristics**

	Practical obstacles	Social obstacles	Financial obstacles	Motivational obstacles
Sex				
Female	23%	34%	61%	25%
Male	19%	25%	52%	27%
Age				
< 22 years	21%	26%	56%	26%
22–24 years	22%	29%	56%	27%
25–29 years	22%	32%	59%	27%
30 and over	21%	44%	59%	23%
Migration background				
Second generation	21%	28%	58%	26%
First generation	23%	25%	59%	22%
Without migrational background	21%	32%	57%	27%
International	22%	20%	57%	20%
Other (born abroad, but native)	20%	25%	52%	24%

Table continues on the next page

2 Students from non-tertiary and tertiary backgrounds refer to students without and with tertiary educated parents.

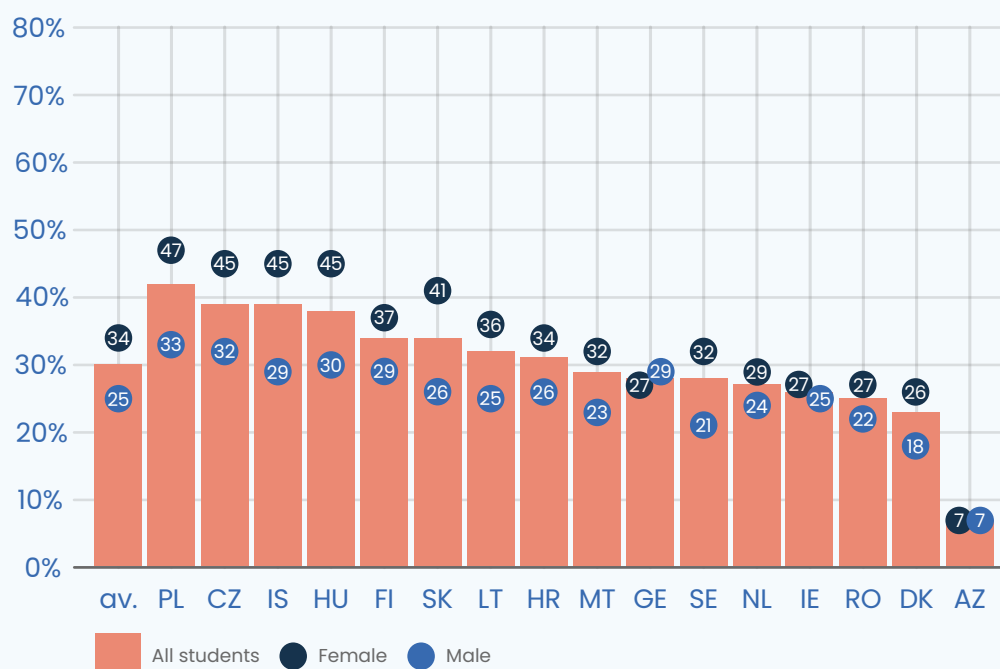
	Practical obstacles	Social obstacles	Financial obstacles	Motivational obstacles
Parental education				
Tertiary	21%	28%	54%	25%
Non-tertiary	23%	33%	62%	27%
Don't know	23%	27%	57%	26%
Parental financial status				
(Very) well-off	20%	30%	44%	26%
Average	22%	31%	61%	26%
Not (at all) well-off	24%	30%	75%	26%

Data source: EUROSTUDENT 8 SUF (micro data; weighted for national representative samples).

When taking a closer look at the shares of students with social obstacles by sex, one can see that in 14 out of 16 countries female students more often report social obstacles than male students do (the exceptions being Azerbaijan and Georgia)

(Figure 2). The gap varies across countries; the biggest gender gap is found in Iceland, Slovakia, and Hungary (16 and 15 %-points), whereas the smallest gap is found in Ireland, Georgia, and Azerbaijan (2 and 1 %-points respectively).

Figure 2. **Share of social obstacles by sex, per country**



Data source: EUROSTUDENT 8 SUF (micro data; weighted for national representative samples).

Data collection: Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

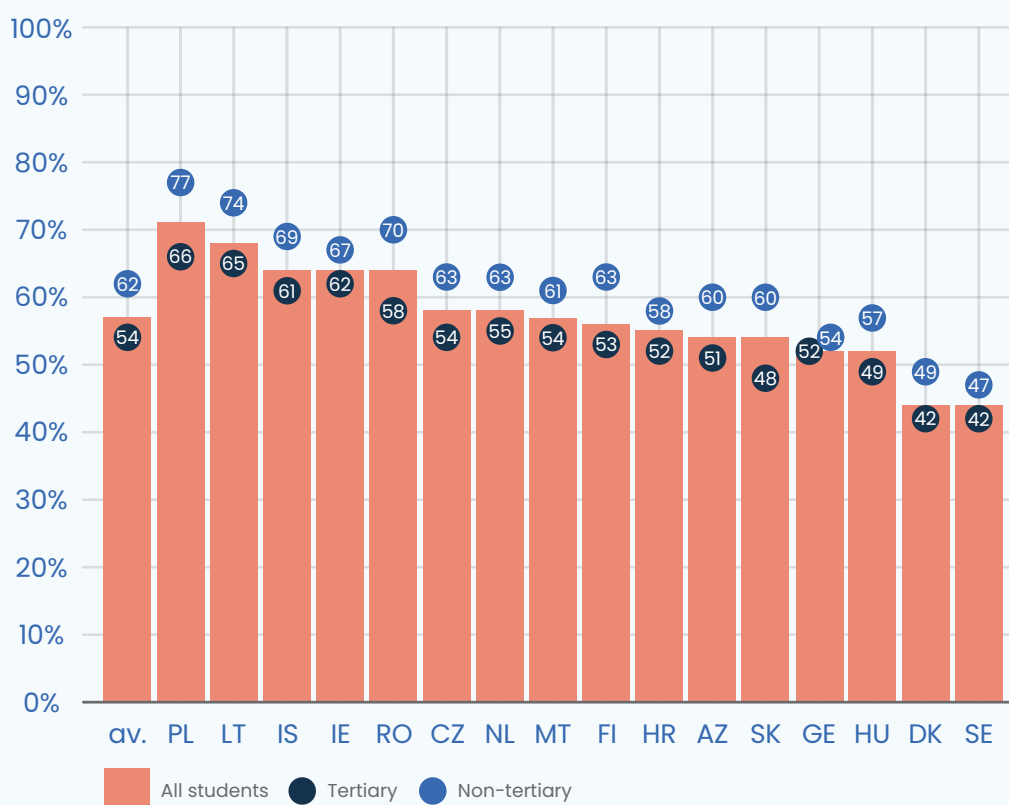
EUROSTUDENT question: 5.11 To what extent are or were the following aspects an obstacle to you for enrolment abroad?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, NL.

In all countries, students from non-tertiary backgrounds more often report financial obstacles than those with tertiary backgrounds (Figure 3). However, the gap between the two groups varies

across countries. It is biggest in Romania, Slovakia, and Poland (12 and 11 %-points), and smallest in Sweden and Georgia (5 and 2 %-points).

Figure 3. **Share of financial obstacles by parental education, per country**



Data source: EUROSTUDENT 8 SUF (micro data; weighted for national representative samples).

Data collection: Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

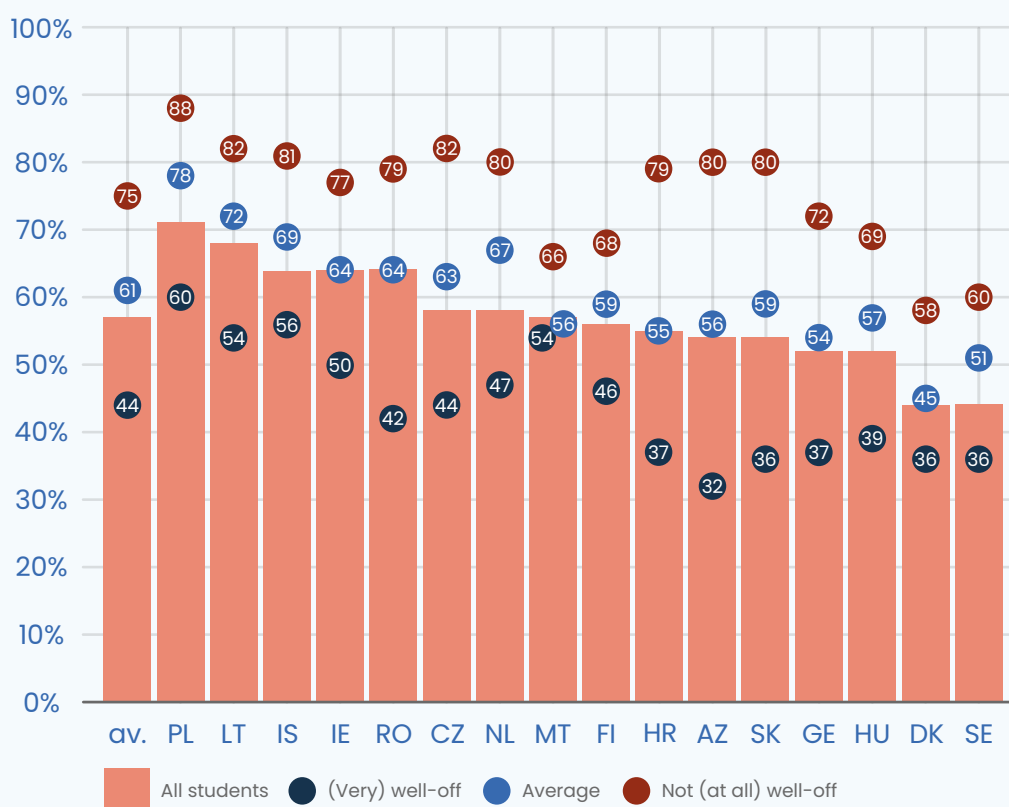
EUROSTUDENT question: 5.11 To what extent are or were the following aspects an obstacle to you for enrolment abroad?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, NL.

Finally, Figure 4 shows that disparity of parental financial status is prevalent in all countries. The same pattern is found in each country: students with parents that are not (at all) well-off most often report financial obstacles, followed by those

whose parents are averagely well-off and students with (very) well-off parents. This 'wealth' gap in financial obstacles is the biggest in Azerbaijan and Slovakia, and smallest (although still prevalent) in countries such as Denmark and Malta.

Figure 4. Share of financial obstacles by parental financial status, per country



Data source: EUROSTUDENT 8 SUF (micro data; weighted for national representative samples).

Data collection: Spring 2022 – summer 2022 except RO (spring 2023 – summer 2023).

EUROSTUDENT question: 5.11 To what extent are or were the following aspects an obstacle to you for enrolment abroad?

Deviations from EUROSTUDENT standard target group: IE, NL.

Notes: the five response categories (“not at all well-off”, “not very well-off”, “average”, “somewhat well-off”, “very well-off”) were recoded into three categories: “(very) well off”, “average”, “not (at all) well-off”.

Regression analyses on differences in obstacles between students

In order to answer the second research question (“To what extent are there differences in experienced obstacles between students from different socio-demographic backgrounds?”), multilevel logistic regression analyses were conducted.³ The advantage of these regression models (compared to the descriptive findings above) is that it allows us to investigate the relation between a specific socio-demographic background characteristic and an obstacle, while simultaneously taking into account the confounding role of other factors or

characteristics.⁴ This enables us to provide a better estimation of the relationship between students’ socio-demographic background characteristics and experienced obstacles.

Figure 5 shows the findings of the regression models; the columns each represent the results of one of the four obstacles. With regards to financial obstacles, female students, students with less well-off parents, international students, first-generation migrants, and students from

³ The multilevel models consisted of two levels because students (level 1) are nested in countries (level 2).

⁴ Next to the personal (or socio-demographic) background characteristics, which are of main interest in this analysis, the following control variables were also included in the regression models: having children (yes or no), type of university (university vs. non-university), qualification level (Master’s degree (or other postgraduate degree) vs. non-Master’s degree (all either ISCED level 5 or 6)), study phase (first year student or not), formal student status (full-time vs. not full-time).

non-tertiary backgrounds have higher chances of experiencing financial obstacles compared to their counterparts. To put it differently, those that are generally classified as underrepresented students, are indeed more likely to experience financial obstacles for studying temporarily abroad.

Next, the following students are more likely to experience motivational obstacles: male students and students from non-tertiary backgrounds (compared to female students and students from tertiary backgrounds). On the other hand, students from the oldest age group, first-generation migrants, and international students are less likely to experience motivational obstacles than their counterparts. Unlike the findings for financial obstacles, these results do not show a clear pattern or indication that underrepresented students generally experience more motivational obstacles. Thus, motivational obstacles do not seem to be more prevalent among (all) students that are generally underrepresented in the student population.

Practical obstacles are more likely to be experienced by the following students: female students, students whose parents are less well-off, younger students, international students, first-generation migrants, and students from non-tertiary backgrounds. This seems to indicate that practical obstacles are also more prevalent among those who are generally classified as underrepresented students.

Lastly, the following students have higher chances of experiencing social obstacles: female students, students with very well-off parents, students aged between 22 and 29, students without a migration background (i.e. domestic students), and students from non-tertiary backgrounds. The strongest relationship is found for students having children. Similar to motivational obstacles, these findings show more ambiguous patterns regarding the relationship between socio-demographic background and social obstacles. Our hypothesis that underrepresented students generally experience

more social obstacles is not confirmed. This does not mean that there are no social disparities at all, as female students, for example, are more likely to experience social obstacles than male students. However, we do not find this for a majority of the students that are generally classified as underrepresented students in the student population.

Findings of control variables

Regarding the control variables in Figure 5, we found that students attending non-universities⁵, who are pursuing a Bachelor's degree (or an equivalent degree, all either ISCED levels 5 or 6), students in their second or higher year of study, and full-time students have higher chances of experiencing financial obstacles than their counterparts. Next, the following students are more likely to experience motivational obstacles: university students, Bachelor students (or an equivalent to a Bachelor's degree), students in their second or higher year of study, and full-time students. Practical obstacles are more likely to be experienced by the following students: students at non-universities, students in Master programmes, and students in their second or higher year of study. Finally, the following students have higher chances of experiencing social obstacles: students with children, students enrolled at non-universities, Master students, students in their second or higher year of study, and part-time students.

⁵ Non-universities are types of HEIs other than universities, depending on national legislation and may include universities of applied sciences, polytechnics, professional HEIs, and similar institutions, which offer higher education programmes.

Figure 5. Results of two-level logistic regression models of experienced obstacles (B-coefficients)



Data source: EUROSTUDENT 8 SUF (micro data). Red bars = negative significant effects (i.e. lower chances of experiencing obstacles); green bars = positive significant effects (i.e. higher chances of experiencing obstacles) (one-tailed).

Notes: Financial parental status was included as a scale variable in our models. A higher score indicates a higher parental financial status..

Policy recommendations

Students in all EUROSTUDENT countries most often report experiencing financial obstacles for studying abroad, followed by social, motivational, and practical obstacles. Thus, financing is the biggest hurdle for students in all countries, underscoring the importance of the public task for the need of (more) financial aid and targeted support programmes (e.g., Annex II to the Rome Communiqué, 2020; Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009; London Communiqué, 2007; Yerevan Communiqué, 2015). Furthermore, the findings show that there are quite some differences in experienced obstacles between the EUROSTUDENT countries. Students from different countries vary in the extent in which they experience these obstacles; this is relevant for policy and decision makers, particularly for those in countries with relatively high shares of experienced obstacles.

In this brief, we aimed to provide more insight into the extent to which experienced obstacles for studying temporarily abroad vary between students from different socio-demographic backgrounds. We were particularly interested if underrepresented students generally experience more obstacles than their counterparts. First, we conclude that students who are generally classified as underrepresented students, are indeed more likely to experience financial obstacles for studying abroad. The same conclusion can be drawn with regard to practical obstacles for studying abroad. These findings once again underscore the public task for financial aid and targeted support programmes for these specific groups of students to overcome financial hurdles. In addition, potential practical obstacles can also be addressed by providing students – especially those that are generally underrepresented in the student population – with more (accessible) information and help with practical matters, both at institutional and country level. All in all, it is important that the experiences and benefits of temporary ISM are available to all student groups. Developing innovative forms of mobility that allow greater

flexibility such as virtual and blended formats, may be another way to avoid inequalities in experienced obstacles and access to temporary ISM.

Unlike the findings above, motivational obstacles do not seem to be more prevalent among students that are generally underrepresented in the student population. The findings do not show a clear pattern that underrepresented students generally report more motivational obstacles. This is an interesting finding, as it indicates that it is not due to a lack of motivation that underrepresented students are less likely to study temporarily abroad.

Similar to motivational obstacles, the findings regarding social obstacles do not seem to be more prevalent among underrepresented students. The results show more ambiguous findings regarding the relationship between students' personal background characteristics and social obstacles. However, this does not mean that there are no social differences at all. For example, female students are more likely to experience social obstacles than male students. However, we do not find this for a majority of the underrepresented student groups. For instance, students whose parents are not very well-off, are less likely to experience social obstacles than those with parents that are (very) well-off. The most important predictor for experiencing social obstacles is having children. A way to possibly tackle social obstacles, especially for students with children, is to provide more flexible forms of mobility, as mentioned above.

In conclusion, our findings – in particular regarding financial and practical obstacles – corroborate the general consensus that not all students have equal access to international mobility opportunities (e.g. European Commission, 2019; Hauschildt et al., 2021). This general consensus, among other things, has led the European Commission to adopt the proposal for the Council Recommendation 'Europe

on the Move – learning mobility for everyone’ (European Commission, 2023). This initiative seeks to promote learning mobility opportunities for everyone, particularly targeting people with fewer opportunities (i.e. those from lower socio-economic backgrounds). Based on our conclusions, we encourage such initiatives to even expand the focus to the underrepresented students in the student population, in order to promote equal access to international mobility opportunities for all.



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Methodological notes

Obstacles were measured by presenting all students – also those who have not (yet) studied abroad – a list of potential obstacles for enrolment abroad and asking to indicate whether it is a ‘big obstacle’ or ‘no obstacle’ or somewhere in between (on a 5-Point Likert Scale). The following potential obstacles were listed:

1. Insufficient skills in foreign language
2. Lack of information provided by HEI
3. Separation from partner, child(ren)
4. Separation from social circle (friends, parents, etc.)
5. Additional financial burden
6. Loss of paid job due to absence
7. Lack of motivation
8. Low benefit for studies at home
9. Difficult integration of enrolment abroad into structure of home study programme
10. Problems with recognition of results achieved abroad
11. Visa/residence permit problems
12. Admission restrictions to mobility programmes (e.g. grades)
13. Health/disability⁶
14. Temporary global or local travel restrictions

We employed explorative factor analysis to identify different dimensions/categories of the listed obstacles. Two categories of obstacles were found: practical and social obstacles (Cronbach alpha's= 0.80 and 0.60; See Table 2). The following obstacles listed above were not related and therefore excluded: 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7.

Table 2. **Factor loadings (oblique rotation) for obstacles in practical and social mobility**

Items	Practical	Social
Problems with recognition of results achieved abroad	0.787	
Difficult integration of enrolment abroad into structure of home study programme	0.706	
Admission restrictions to mobility programmes (e.g. grades)	0.694	
Visa/residence permit problems	0.672	
Low benefit for studies at home	0.522	
Temporary global or local travel restrictions	0.440	
Separation from partner, child(ren)		0.658
Separation from social circle (friends, parents, etc.)		0.644

⁶ We excluded 'health/disability' from our analyses, because almost one third of the countries (5 out of 16) did not have information available on all questions that were health-related, including this one.

Because of potential policy interest, we included the items ‘additional financial burden’ and ‘lack of motivation’ as financial and motivational obstacles (respectively). Financial obstacles may play an important role for *not* studying abroad, especially for students that are generally underrepresented in the total student population. Motivational obstacles are mainly interesting in order to see whether differences in motivational obstacles are related to differences between groups of students.

About EUROSTUDENT

The EUROSTUDENT project collates comparable student survey data on the social dimension of European higher education, collecting data on a wide range of topics, e.g. the socio-economic background, living conditions, and temporary international mobility of students. The project strives to provide reliable and insightful cross-country comparisons. The data presented here stem from the eighth round of the EUROSTUDENT project (2021–2024).

Countries participating in EUROSTUDENT

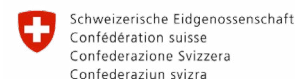
- Azerbaijan (AZ)
- Austria (AT)
- Croatia (HR)
- Czech Republic (CZ)
- Denmark (DK)
- Estonia (EE)
- Finland (FI)
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- Germany (DE)
- Hungary (HU)
- Iceland (IS)
- Ireland (IE)
- Latvia (LV)
- Lithuania (LT)
- Malta (MT)
- Norway (NO)
- Poland (PL)
- Portugal (PT)
- Romania (RO)
- Slovakia (SK)
- Spain (ES)
- Sweden (SE)
- Switzerland (CH)
- The Netherlands (NL)

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