



Internationalisation in Higher Education: Post-Covid Trends of Students' Mobility (Case Study EUROMED Countries)

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Purpose: This article examines trends in the internationalisation of higher education within the Euro-Mediterranean (EUROMED) region, with a particular focus on student mobility as a driving force for fostering academic collaboration across borders.

Study design/methodology/approach: The research uses data from UNESCO to analyse student movement patterns in 23 Euro-Mediterranean countries. It considers key factors influencing these trends, including economic incentives, geopolitical stability, and cultural linkages. It also assesses the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international student mobility and the adaptation of physical, virtual, and blended mobility formats to new realities.

Findings: The findings highlight that while physical mobility remains essential, the rise of virtual and blended mobility options post-pandemic has introduced more inclusive and accessible student pathways. This shift enhances the resilience and adaptability of internationalisation frameworks within the EUROMED region, enabling a more robust response to the fluctuating global conditions.

Originality/value: This study provides a comprehensive look at the unique cultural, geopolitical, and educational context of the EUROMED region. It underscores the importance of innovative mobility models in creating a more inclusive internationalisation approach that can withstand external challenges, particularly in a post-pandemic landscape.

Introduction

Internationalisation in higher education has emerged as a fundamental aspect of academic advancement and worldwide collaboration, especially via student mobility. This article examines the internationalisation trends of higher education in the Euro-Mediterranean (EUROMED) region, which consists of the countries from both the European Union (EU) and the Mediterranean basin that are involved in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (also known as the Barcelona Process), comprising both European Union and non-EU Mediterranean nations; concentrating on student mobility as one of principal catalyst for academic collaboration and intercultural interchange. In recent decades, student mobility has revolutionised higher education institutions by promoting cultural integration, augmenting institutional capabilities, and expanding academic opportunities. The EUROMED region is a distinctive case study for evaluating these tendencies owing to its historical, cultural, and geopolitical connections.

The EUROMED region is distinguished by a diverse amalgamation of cultures and educational traditions, rendering it an advantageous environment for international collaboration. Numerous internationalisation programs, like the Erasmus+ program and the Bologna Process, have markedly enhanced student mobility between EU and non-EU Mediterranean nations. Initiatives such as the Barcelona and Cairo Declarations have significantly influenced the educational framework of the region, fostering the establishment of a unified Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education Area. These policies have prioritised quality assurance, degree equivalence, and research collaboration, enhancing student interactions around the Mediterranean. However, the dynamics of student mobility within this region are complex, with certain countries emerging as more attractive study destinations than others.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced further obstacles to internationalisation initiatives, significantly diminishing physical mobility and redirecting emphasis towards virtual and hybrid mobility modalities. Although virtual mobility enables students to engage in global educational experiences without physical travel, it underscores the necessity for more inclusive and adaptable internationalisation initiatives. The emergence of blended learning models, integrating brief physical contacts with virtual elements, is a burgeoning trend that may influence the future of student mobility in the post-pandemic era.

This paper analyses trends and challenges of student mobility in the EUROMED region, using data from significant periods and investigating the evolution of internationalisation activities. The research component concentrates on 23 countries of the Euro-Mediterranean (EUROMED) region. It examines these countries' unique geopolitical and cultural backdrop, offering insights into the potential and challenges EU and non-EU Mediterranean countries encounter in cultivating a vibrant and inclusive higher education landscape.

Key Developments in Internationalisation and Mobility

Internationalisation is an old phenomenon in higher education. However, the rapid changes in the field are observed through several activities and developments. Student and staff mobility dominated in the past. The consequences of the technological revolution have made higher education more sophisticated worldwide, and joint programs or degrees, branch offices abroad, and involvement in international consortia are now gaining prominence (Jones, 2020).

Many attempts have been made to define internationalisation. Knight, 2003, gives an encompassing definition that is relevant to this paper: "Internationalisation of higher education at the national, sectoral, and institutional level is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education". This definition has been modified and expanded to emphasise that internationalisation should shift its focus from mobility to curriculum and learning outcomes to become less elitist and more inclusive (Hunter et al., 2023, p. 47; Jones, 2020).

In research conducted by IAU in 2019, institutions were asked to define their most essential internationalisation activities. In total, 907 institutions from 126 countries worldwide participated in the survey, and they ranked the highest priorities in internationalisation as 'multilateral student exchange', 'developing institutional strategic partnerships', and 'outgoing mobility opportunities for students'. The next two priorities following the highest ones are 'international research collaboration' and 'developing joint/double/multiple degree programs with foreign institutions'. Priorities ranked as the lowest are 'recruiting fee-paying international undergraduate students', 'international development and capacity building projects', 'delivery of distance/online education', and 'strengthening international/intercultural content of curriculum'.

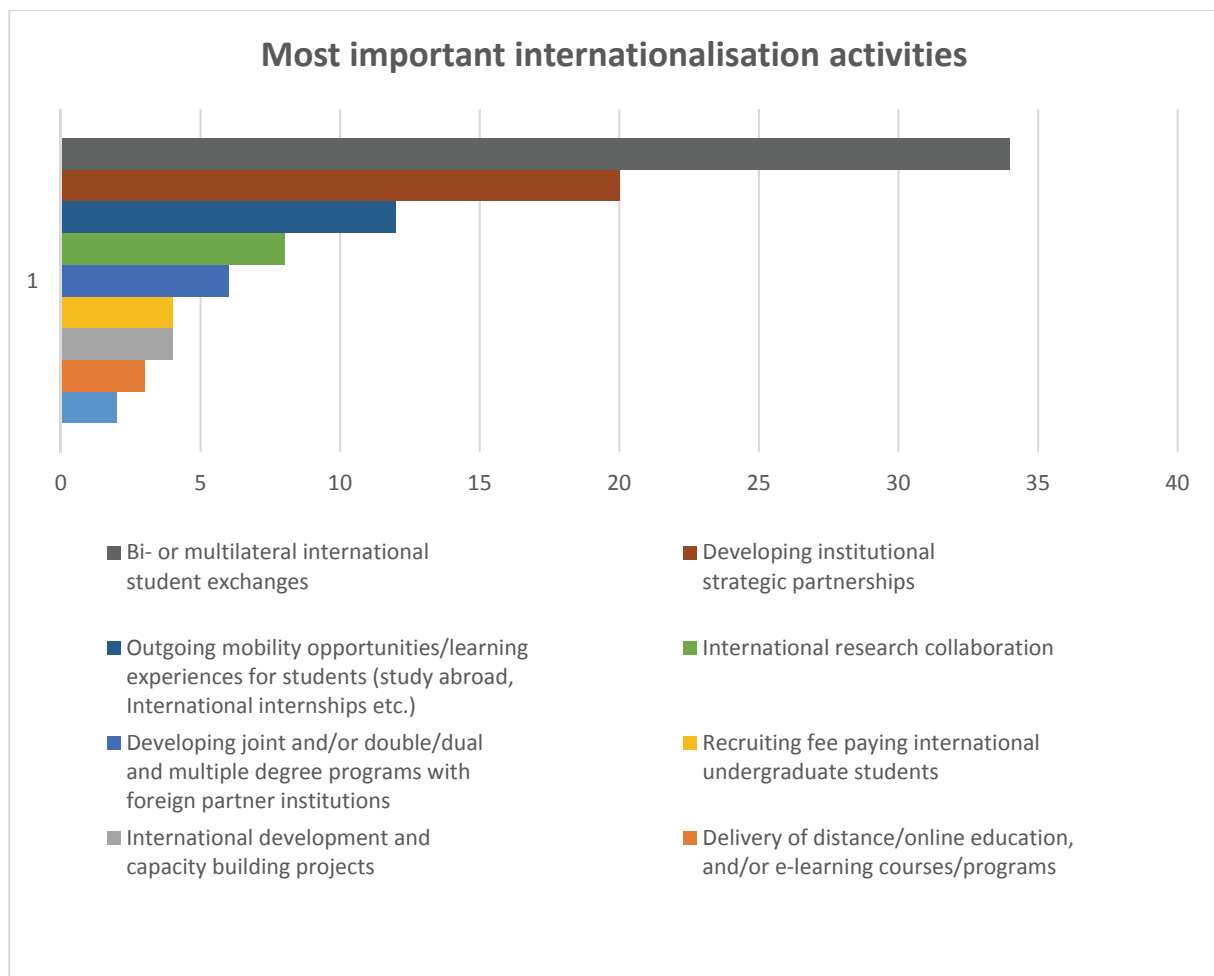


Figure 1: Most essential internationalisation activities

Internationalisation brings many benefits (IAU, 2019): it enhances international cooperation, improves teaching and learning quality, increases graduate employability, strengthens research and knowledge production, fosters cultural exchange, and boosts institutional reputation. According to IAU findings in 2019 and 2023, 'Enhanced international cooperation and capacity building' are the most significant benefits of internationalisation at the institutional level.

However, the internationalisation of higher education has its challenges. IAU Global Survey Reports (2009, 2019, 2023), pointed out challenges, as:

- financial opportunities connected to different forms of internationalisation may result in the reduction of higher education as a public good;
- the increased competition between higher education institutions may reduce rather than increase cooperation among them;
- the importance of the promotion of cultural diversity may be reduced by the extension of “the strongest” language and dominant culture, national identities are getting lost;
- difficulty in assessing/recognising the quality of courses/programs offered by foreign institutions;
- brain drain.

European Directions in internationalisation

Many internationalisation policies such as Framework Programme for HE research (from 1982 on), Erasmus – Socrates (from 1987 on), Tempus, Barcelona Declaration (1995), Bologna Declaration (1999), Lisbon Strategy (2000), Erasmus Mundus (2001), Cairo Declaration

(2007), et al. had a significant impact on higher education systems in Europe and broader, and national governments and individual higher education institutions more or less reacted to (or we can expect that they will react to) these developments.

Europe's internationalisation efforts have come a long way in the last ten years, largely thanks to the necessity of maintaining Europe's competitiveness in the global market. As such, it has become essential to implement extra internationalisation strategies. These tactics include strengthening international staff and student mobility, internationalising curriculum, promoting cooperative efforts, strategic alliances, and capacity building (European Commission 2013). Furthermore, the European Commission recognised the value of internationalisation at home in 2013 and included it in its educational policies (European Commission 2013; Soulé, 2023). Since then, efforts have been made to delineate its meaning, considering it a more holistic and integrative approach. Internationalisation at home has become commonly interpreted as an effort to equip most non-mobile students with international skills and intercultural competencies.

The external dimension of the Bologna Process and Euro-Mediterranean Region

Euro-Mediterranean is an important region of which countries in the "European part" are today EU Member States. There has been much cooperation between countries of both regions already (Tempus projects covered through MEDA Programmes, Cards and Tacis in the Western Balkans, East Europe and Central Asian region)

The external dimension of the Bologna Process has been instrumental in extending these benefits beyond Europe. In the Euro-Mediterranean region, initiatives such as the Catania Declaration (2006) and the Cairo Declaration 'Towards a Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education & Research Area' (2007) have emphasised the establishment of a cohesive "Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education Area", focusing on quality assurance, qualification comparability, and research collaboration. These initiatives have enhanced mobility while promoting institutional capacity development and educational reforms.

For the region's balanced and sustainable development, internationalisation must be set to guarantee mutual benefits. These benefits can be summarised as (1) increased mobility of students, staff and academics, (2) increased capacity of HE institutions in the South and North to co-operate internationally, (3) reciprocal development of human resources continually, (4) improving the quality and efficiency of education in South countries (5) promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship (6) enhancing creativity and innovation (7) and making the links with the labour market (EUA 2014, p. 4).

The Euro-Mediterranean region, characterised by its extensive cultural history and geopolitical positioning, plays a vital role in these developments. The Union for the Mediterranean has actively advocated for higher education to cultivate peace, stability, and mutual prosperity in the region. Initiatives such as the Euro-Mediterranean University have been created to promote academic collaboration and intercultural conversation, thereby advancing the overarching objectives of the Euro-Mediterranean relationship.

Trends in Mobilities of Students in the Euro-Mediterranean region

In the context of the evolving trends related to COVID-19 and the post-COVID-19 era, the proactive enhancement of internationalisation strategies paves the way for creating inventive and resilient frameworks for student and staff mobility, both in physical and virtual realms. This is closely aligned with the emergence of fresh Erasmus funding opportunities (Tan, 2023).

Before the pandemic, physical mobility prevailed, supported by initiatives such as the Erasmus+ program and the Bologna Process, which prioritised student exchanges and studying abroad as fundamental aspects of internationalisation.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which limited international mobility, has brought attention to the significance of "internationalisation at home," the difficulties in fostering meaningful student interaction, and the necessity of an empathic and compassionate pedagogy in emergency remote education (European Commission 2020).

After COVID-19, new forms of mobility emerged to accommodate travel constraints and evolving global circumstances. Virtual mobility has gained significance, enabling students to participate in worldwide experiences without physical travel. This mode of mobility utilises technology to facilitate education across boundaries, offering opportunities for students who cannot engage in actual exchanges. The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange project by the European Commission was an effort that enabled intercultural experiences via online contacts. This virtual component enabled students from regions like Southern Mediterranean countries to engage with peers globally (European Commission 2020).

Moreover, blended mobility, integrating short-term physical mobility with virtual elements, has been introduced to enhance flexibility and enrich learning experiences. Hybrid mobility, incorporating both virtual and physical components, is also used. This type of mobility enables institutions to provide a more comprehensive array of internationalisation possibilities for students who need help engaging in conventional full-time exchanges (European Commission 2022, Unesco 2022, p 15).

These shifts reflect a move towards more inclusive, flexible, and technology-driven forms of student mobility, which accommodate various circumstances and enhance global learning opportunities.

Methodology

Considering the distinctive geopolitical context of the Euro-Mediterranean region, comprising both EU and non-EU nations with varied educational frameworks and internationalisation strategies, a case study can yield detailed insights into the region-specific challenges and opportunities for student mobility.

Due to their distinct geopolitical and educational significance in the Mediterranean, this research concentrates on Euro-Mediterranean countries, including the EU and non-EU. The Euro-Mediterranean, being a region of strategic importance, has challenges and opportunities for student mobility, particularly post-COVID-19. The research also included Jordan, even if it does not border the Mediterranean Sea, as being considered to be part of the broader Southern Mediterranean region in diplomatic and cooperative frameworks. This emphasis facilitates a comprehensive and contextual investigation of internationalisation trends and student mobility among nations with distinct cultural, economic, and historical connections.

The study will concentrate on inbound and outbound student mobility within the Euro-Mediterranean region. This paper analyses mobility trends over the past two decades, including periods before and after key events like the COVID-19 epidemic, to elucidate how these factors have impacted the character and amount of student exchanges. The trends of other types of mobilities that emerged in the region in the last years, particularly during COVID-19 and after COVID-19, will also be analysed.

The research is a quantitative study based on secondary data.

Data on inbound and outbound mobilities have been gathered from UNESCO's Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students database (UIS Statistics, unesco.org). The analysis covers the past 17 years, focusing on mobilities in 2005, 2013, and 2022, based on data available from UNESCO. For 2023, only data on inbound mobilities are available in the UNESCO database, and even these are available for only 17 out of the 23 countries of interest. Due to this limitation, we used the 2022 data for our analysis.

Data on other forms of mobilities are sourced from the European Commission.

Research questions focus on mobility trends, integrating the impact of COVID-19 and new mobility options like virtual and blended formats.

1. What are the key drivers and barriers influencing student physical mobility in the 23 Euro-Mediterranean countries, particularly in post-COVID-19 changes in mobility trends?
2. Considering the rise of virtual and blended mobility options, how do these factors (drivers and barriers) impact the regional balance of outgoing and incoming student mobilities within the 23 Euro-Mediterranean countries?

Analyses and Findings

In this part, we will first elaborate on how students' physical mobilities have changed in the last 17 years in the Mediterranean. For this purpose, we will use data from 2005, 2013, and 2022 to showcase the trends in incoming and outgoing mobilities of 23 countries in the Mediterranean and the net flow between incoming and outgoing mobilities.

In the second part of the research, we will examine in depth the developments of other forms of mobility that have emerged in recent years.

Limitation of research: We do not have data about incoming mobilities for some counties for all three periods. Concerning other forms of mobility, only data on virtual exchange are publicly available.

Trends in Mobilities of Students in the Euro-Mediterranean region

Outgoing mobilities

The data on outgoing mobilities in 2005, 2013, and 2022 (see Table 1) show two tendencies. They present which countries have the highest and lowest numbers of outgoing mobilities and how the mobility trends changed from 2005 to 2022.

Looking at average mobilities in all three statistical periods, countries can be divided into four primary groups. The first group are countries with 50.000 to 80.000 of outgoing mobilities. These countries are France, Italy, Morocco, and Turkey. The second group are countries with 20.000 to 50.000 outgoing mobilities. These countries are the Syrian Arab Republic, Greece, Spain, Egypt, Algeria, Cyprus, Jordan, and Palestine. In the third group are Tunisia, Albania, Lebanon, Israel and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a number of outbound students from 10.000 to 20.000. The last (fourth) group has the smallest number of outbound students, with a number under 10.000.

Table 1: Incoming vs outgoing mobilities 2005, 2013, 2022 and net flows

	No. of mobilities outgoing			No. of mobilities incoming			Net flow		
	2005	2013	2022	2005	2013	2022	2005	2013	2022
Turkey	53402	44964	60322	18166	54387	244027	-35236	9423	183705

France	49177	84059	113515	236518	239344	263458	187341	155285	149943
Morocco	46009	38599	74289	4958		23584	-41051	-38599	-50705
Greece	41680	34029	38484	15690	27600	26785	-25990	-6429	-11699
Italy	38399	47998	86469	44921	82450	89946	6522	34452	3477
Spain	24931	28640	50838	17675	56361	91692	-7256	27721	40854
Algeria	24696	20695	35821	5343	7953	7724	-19353	-12742	-28097
Cyprus	21354	26233	25585	4895	4832	10731	-16459	-21401	-14854
Bosnia and Herzegovina	16469	10864	15188		8147	5691	-16469	-2717	-9497
Syrian Arab Republic	16393	22591	104987				-16393	-22591	
Albania	15193	24147	14819		3667	1872	-15193	-20480	-12947
Tunisia	14980	16889	27234		6236	8642	-14980	-10653	-18592
Lebanon	13448	12000	28102	14073	17495	40246	625	5495	12144
Jordan	12269	20019	33277	21481		39225	9212	-20019	5948
Israel	11808	14732	18998			13181	-11808	-14732	-5817
Palestine	11604	20918	31498				-11604	-20918	
Croatia	10433	8617	10047	3459	842	5735	-6974	-7775	-4312
Egypt, Arab Rep.	9621	19744	69371	30723	43993	69828	21102	24249	457
Libya	3501	6448	8019				-3501	-6448	
Slovenia	2718	2695	3040	1088	2563	7729	-1630	-132	4689
Malta	811	1938	1135	605	739	4531	-206	-1199	3396
Monaco	344	347	495			910	-344	-347	415
Montenegro	73	4766	5385				-73	-4766	

We can observe an extremely high increase in outgoing mobilities in some countries. Comparing periods 2005 and 2022, mobilities more than doubled in 2022 in Montenegro (73.6 times), Syria (6.4 times), Egypt (7.2 times), Palestine (2.7 times), Jordan (2.7 times), Libya (2,3 times), Italy (2.2 times), France (2,3 times). Data from 2022 show that most students from Syria went to Turkey (23,350), Germany (10,945), France (8,215), and Jordan (6.600). Similar tendencies can be noticed for 2021. The extremely high increase in outgoing mobilities of students from Syria in recent years can be, therefore, attributed also to crises, such as conflict and war. In 2022, most students from Egypt went to Saudi Arabia (15,410), the United States (7,615), the United Kingdom (6,890), Germany (4,870), and France (3,955). The high increase in the mobilities of students from Egypt can be attributed to cultural and linguistic proximity with Saudi Arabia and job opportunities, favourable post-graduation work opportunities in countries like the UK, and scholarship opportunities in France, Germany, and the USA.

Incoming mobilities

As we can see from Table 1, data on incoming mobilities are available for 19 countries; among them, only 12 countries have reported inbound mobile students for all three periods. Looking at the average of all three periods 2005, 2013, 2022, the highest number of students from abroad among Euro-Mediterranean countries has France (236.518 in 2005, 239.344 in 2013; 263.458 in 2022), the second is Turkey (18.166 in 2005, 54.387 in 2013, 244.027 in 2022) and third is Italy (44.921 in 2005, 82.450 in 2013, 89.946 in 2022).

The data on incoming students to Turkey deserve special attention. As table 2 shows, student mobility increased significantly between 2005 and 2013, and this trend has continued ever since. If we compare the data from 2005 to 2022, student mobility increased 13.4 times.

According to Özoğlu et al., 2015, cultural, historical, religious, and ethnic affinities are pull factors that appear to be particularly important in international students' decision to study in Turkey. Funding prospects are a significant draw factor, as at least 25% of all international students in Turkey receive scholarships. Another factor that might have an impact on such a high increase in international students might be the flow of migrants and refugees, especially as in 2021, 21% of students who studied in Turkey came from Syria. In 2022, Turkey was the top destination for Syrian students.

The attractiveness of France as a study destination for international students is continuing to grow. According to Apply Board Report 2022, France hosted 6 % of the total number of mobile students in the world, which puts France, together with Russia and Australia, in the third place of world countries which are the most attractive for students (on the first place is the USA with 15%, on the second place is the United Kingdom with 10 %), (Apply Board, 2022). The reason for such attractiveness for studying in France is that students with a student visa can apply for a temporary work permit, giving them the right to work for a limited number of hours per week. However, students must fulfil the financial requirements (a monthly financial guarantee of approximately €526) to be eligible to apply for a student visa. French law authorises students to work a maximum of 964 hours a year, about 20 hours per week. France is also committed to treating French and international students equally, with identical and very low tuition fees for courses leading to national diplomas (Expatica. 2015).

Countries with more incoming than outgoing students are considered "attractive countries" for higher education. Mediterranean countries that had a positive net flow of mobile students in 2022 (inbound—outbound) are Turkey (183.705), France (149.943), Spain (40.854), Jordan (5.958), Lebanon (12144), Slovenia (4689), Italy (3.477), Malta (3396), Egypt (457), and Monaco (415).

Some countries have very low incoming student numbers in relation to outgoing students. This tendency indicates an inferior degree of attractiveness of these countries' higher education institutions to international students. This is particularly the case in Western Balkan and Maghreb countries.

For the Western Balkans, the data for Albania clearly stand out. According to data for 2022, there were about 8 times more outbound students from Albania studying abroad (14.819) than international students from abroad (2.088); a similar tendency was also in 2013. Negative tendencies that showcase 2 to 3 times fewer incoming students than outgoing are characterised also by two other Balkan countries, Croatia and Bosnia and Hercegovina. Similar differences in favour of outward mobility occur in Algeria (32.336 outgoing, 9.517 incoming), Morocco (74.289 outgoing, 23584 incoming), and Tunisia (27.234 outgoing, 8642 incoming). This negative tendency is characterised also by Cyprus and Greece. If we compare 2022 data with those from 2021 (see Table 2), we can notice very similar tendencies.

There is also a disproportionate nature of the mobility to the EU and non-EU Mediterranean countries (i.e. more people coming to the EU than vice versa). EU-Mediterranean countries are more attractive for students than non-EU Mediterranean countries. Higher wages and lower unemployment characterise the European labour market compared to the labour markets in most non-EU Mediterranean countries. As EU universities can offer access to the European labour market, they attract more students. Thus, the prospects of higher employability and better salary profiles after studies seem promising. Countries with strong cultural, linguistic, or historical ties to other nations, such as a large diaspora or shared language, see higher mobility rates. For example, many students from Maghreb countries choose France due to the common language and cultural connections.

Table 2: Incoming vs outgoing mobilities (net flow) in 2021 and 2022

	Net flow 2021	Net flow 2022
Turkey	171877	183705
France	147066	149943
Morocco	-45280	-50705
Greece	-16803	-11699
Italy	-12746	3477
Spain	34075	40854
Algeria	-22819	-28097
Cyprus	-15037	-14854
Bosnia and Herzegovina	-9510	-9497
Syrian Arab Republic		
Albania	-12032	-12947
Tunisia		-18592
Lebanon	10204	12144
Jordan	10807	5948
Israel	-4973	-5817
Palestine	-29750	
Croatia	-6150	-4312
Egypt, Arab Rep.		457
Libya		
Slovenia	4525	4689
Malta	1857,2	3396
Monaco	-171	415
Montenegro	-5225	

Obstacles, such as programme incompatibility, problems of recognition, and security risks associated with an unstable political climate, diminish the appeal of non-EU Mediterranean Countries as exchange destinations and affect the internationalisation strategy in the region (Council of Europe 2015, p.9).

Due to negative net results in the mobility flows, the HE systems in non-EU Mediterranean countries, i.e., Maghreb countries, are undergoing transformations, such as profound national legislative reforms, to become more attractive for African students, with a focus on Sub-Saharan African students (Union for the Mediterranean, 2021, p. 27).

The lower rate of incoming students in smaller Euro-Mediterranean countries (such as Malta, Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Albania, and Cyprus) can be a direct consequence of their population size and of the reduced overall capacity of their university structures (Council of Europe 2015, p.9).

Changing mobility trends, particularly after COVID-19 and with the rise of virtual and blended mobility options

Mobility fosters the professional development of individuals and human resource development in general, with immense benefits for the EU and neighbourhood countries, particularly in view of current demographic and migration patterns. Mobility is, therefore, one of the important tools

for linking east and west as well as north and south. In the last decade, besides physical mobility, online mobility has brought many opportunities for cooperation between the North and South.

In the context of the evolving trends related to COVID-19 and the post-COVID-19 era, the proactive enhancement of internationalisation strategies paves the way for creating inventive and resilient frameworks for student and staff mobility, both in physical and virtual realms. This is closely aligned with the emergence of fresh Erasmus funding opportunities (Tan, 2023). Further on, trends and findings in online, blended, and hybrid mobility in the Euro-Mediterranean region are presented.

Online mobility

In the last decades, digital education, online courses, and virtual exchanges have also brought new incentives for strategic partnerships between education institutions and new opportunities to reach potential students who may not be able to travel or take a break from employment but who are eager to profit from higher education offers outside their country (European Commission 2013). During the Covid-19 upheaval, virtual mobility formats increased significantly, which led to a change in favour of flexibility and broader technology use. The COVID-19 pandemic's limits have made this important for curriculum delivery and offering alternative embodied mobility alternatives.

The most common and usually quoted definition of Virtual Mobility is provided by the e-learningeuropa portal: "The use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to obtain the same benefits as one would have with physical mobility but without the need to travel" (e.learningeuropa.info 2013).

Virtual exchange is another type of online mobility, but it should not be confused with other 'virtual mobility' activities. While Virtual Exchange is based on learners engaging in structured online intercultural dialogue, virtual mobility may involve students using the internet to follow lectures and access course materials at a university in another geographical location but with no interaction with other students or intentional inclusion of intercultural learning or development of soft skills in the curriculum (UNICollaboration, 2020).

In 2018 – 2020, EC conducted the piloting of Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange. The project was open to anyone aged 18-30 residing in Europe and the Southern Mediterranean, with 28,426 learners engaged. The interest in EVE significantly increased in 2020 due to Covid-19. It was also a result of recognising the limitations and existing constraints, which means international mobility through Erasmus+ is unavailable for all participants — particularly those in Southern Mediterranean countries. EVE has been recognised as "a powerful instrument and catalyst in advancing efforts to internationalise home curricula. In EVE 2018-2020, each country, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Algeria, had around 1000 learners (EC, 2020).

The Erasmus + virtual exchange is also being delivered during programme period 2. Its activities are spread throughout the world. The call in 2023 targets the Western Balkans (Region 1), the Neighbourhood East (Region 2), the South-Mediterranean countries (Region 3), and Sub-Saharan Africa (Region 9) (European Commission 2020).

Blended mobility

Blended learning mobilities were frequently practised before the COVID-19 pandemic through informal connection components like social media and chat applications (Knoch, 2022). Erasmus + Blended mobility has been introduced as a novelty in the Erasmus+ 2021-2027, under Key Action 1, based on experiences that have shown that any student mobility, short or long has very positive effects on students. It involves combining short, intensive physical

mobility for students (5-30 days) with a virtual component before, during and/or after the physical mobility to enrich and diversify the experience of students and staff who would learn, train, or teach abroad. An example of blended mobility can be a summer school. Since the launch of the Blended Intensive Program, many students have benefitted from this type of mobility; however, data are not reported in any publicly available report (European Commission 2022, European Commission 2023, European Commission 2024).

Hybrid mobility

Higher education institutions can offer various internationalisation options thanks to hybrid staff and student mobility. It uses technology to bridge the gap between in-person and virtual international learning and cooperation, acknowledging that not everyone can or wants to participate in traditional, full-time physical exchanges (Unesco, 2022, p. 15). However, specific numbers of beneficiaries of hybrid mobilities in the Euro-Mediterranean region are not reported in publicly available data.

Conclusion

The modernisation of higher education (HE) systems in non-EU Mediterranean countries has garnered considerable attention owing to the advantages of enhanced collaboration with EU counterparts. Such collaboration primarily manifests through policy discourse, capacity building at national and regional levels, research innovation, and enhanced mobility options for students, researchers, and academics facilitated by initiatives such as Erasmus+ and other European programs. Non-EU Mediterranean countries contribute distinctive advantages to this collaboration, grounded on their profound cultural legacy and dedication to education. Conversely, the EU provides established pedagogical methodologies, lifelong learning frameworks, comprehensive qualification systems, and robust educational governance, which could facilitate non-EU Mediterranean countries in developing cohesive systems that equip students for the evolving labour market over the next two decades.

Mobility and exchanges have long-term benefits for the Euro-Mediterranean region, enhancing human resource development and professional advancement, especially considering prevailing demographic and migratory patterns. Nonetheless, non-EU Mediterranean nations face challenges establishing themselves as appealing study locations.

The post-COVID-19 landscape of student mobility in the Mediterranean is seeing substantial transformations. Although physical mobility is crucial, virtual and hybrid options now provide greater flexibility and inclusivity for students. To achieve balanced regional growth, it is essential to persist in diminishing barriers, fostering equal mobility, and enhancing higher education institutions across the Mediterranean.

Key Drivers and Barriers Influencing Student Physical Mobility in 23 countries of the Euro-Mediterranean region (Post-COVID-19)

The principal factors influencing student movement in the Euro-Mediterranean region encompass economic incentives, including affordable tuition costs, scholarships, and employment prospects upon graduation. Countries like France and Turkey have leveraged these factors, making them attractive student destinations. Cultural and linguistic connections enhance mobility, particularly between Maghreb nations and France. Conversely, obstacles such as political instability, economic difficulties, and difficulty with qualification recognition continue to pose substantial hindrances, especially in non-EU Mediterranean nations.

Mobility and exchanges promote enduring advantages for the Euro-Mediterranean region, especially by advancing professional development and human resource enhancement.

Nonetheless, non-EU Mediterranean nations persist in establishing themselves as appealing study locations. Consequently, it is imperative to facilitate outward mobility from the EU to these nations, specifically focusing on student credit mobility. These measures urge universities to enhance their services for both incoming and outgoing students, evaluate and refine curricula, and bolster their leadership to achieve international prominence. Erasmus+ initiatives, particularly under Key Action 1 (KA107) and Erasmus Mundus joint master's degrees, are integral to this process. To this end, the European Union has proposed specific measures, including a doubling of the budget for the European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) during the program periods 2013-2020 and 2021-2027, compared to its previous programme period (Soule, 2023).

Impact of Drivers and Barriers on Regional Balance of Incoming and Outgoing Mobilities (Considering Virtual and Blended Mobility)

The regional balance of incoming and outgoing mobilities shows a clear imbalance. Non-EU Mediterranean countries like Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia experience high outbound mobility but struggle to attract incoming students. Conversely, EU Mediterranean nations like France, Spain, and Italy experience a net influx of students owing to their solid educational frameworks and superior employment opportunities. Conflict-induced migration, as evidenced in Syria, has resulted in a significant influx of students pursuing stability in Turkey and European nations.

The post-COVID-19 age has witnessed a significant rise in virtual and hybrid mobility choices, providing alternatives to traditional obstacles like travel and budgetary limitations, with efforts financially backed by the Erasmus+ programme. Although these modalities offer greater inclusivity and flexibility, physical movement is crucial for enhancing intercultural communication. Since its launch in 2019, the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange program has significantly influenced the international and cross-cultural experiences of over 10,000 students from non-Eu Mediterranean countries. Virtual mobility, while beneficial for students who are unable to travel, should be viewed as a supplement rather than a substitute for physical exchanges.

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