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Study report

The Compass Project: An overview of activities, findings, conclusions and recommendations

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Chapter 1: Outline of the project

1.1 The project

The Compass Project is an Erasmus+ funded project that aims to improve the orientation and planning phases of students preparing to go on mobility. In order to do so, and given the importance of peer-to-peer communication for such students, the project developed the Compass Platform - a tool that allows students preparing to go on mobility to receive 'informal' feedback from students who have already been on mobility to the city/country they are considering. It therefore closes the gap between the provision of higher education institution (HEI) more 'formal' channels of communication and the needs of students. The platform will enable potential mobile students to gain additional information to help them make the 'right' decision on where to apply.

The Compass Project will offer access to quality primarily peer-to-peer information on mobility options to support students in their decision making. Another anticipated outcome of the project will be to engender a stronger collaboration between HEIs and student associations in the provision of services to incoming and outgoing students. However, to achieve this objective it required the consortium to engage with HEIs and local student associations in the project.

It is the purpose of this document to provide HEIs and student associations with an overview of the Compass Project and to provide them with the research conclusions and relevant information that they can use to improve their services to students in the mobility lifecycle (before, during and after mobility). This will include particularly preparing students for mobility, the gaps in provision, and the benefits of engaging with the Compass Project platform. The project will also offer further documents which will include an in depth look at the project research, recommendations on providing improved support, and more practical support for staff in HEIs and student associations who wish to use the platform within their institutions.

The Compass Project builds upon an earlier project, the Buddy System Project. That project provided a platform for incoming international students to 'match' with local students at host institutions in order to provide a smoother integration of the former into their new university environment. The project platform also helped HEIs in terms of workload given that local buddies can assist incoming international students during the pre-arrival phase and during the first few weeks of a semester. It is hoped that the Compass Project will provide similar benefits to HEIs by providing a peer-to-peer platform for 'informal' information to resolve questions which potential students may have and which would otherwise arrive at the door of the international office.

Importantly, the project also identifies those aspects and factors that are currently still lacking in the orientation and planning phase of student mobility. In that regard, the project began with a research phase which looked at the motivations of students and the role of a variety of information sources and channels which students are using in gaining information to underpin their decision making. It included the role of sending and receiving organisations and the role of peer-to-peer communication. It further looked at whether students have rational expectations, based on academic and practical criteria, or more idealised and maybe unrealistic expectations based on social, cultural and subjective personal criteria. The research studies therefore provide

both a framework and recommendations to help students in preparing for mobility and for the design of the Compass Project platform so that it is well-tailored to impact international mobility positively and improve access to information.

1.2 Structure of the report

The report will start by looking at the research surveys (Chapter 2) of both students and stakeholders and the conclusions and recommendations which can support HEIs and student associations in the improvement of mobility services. It will then identify the information sources and channels (Chapter 3), both formal and informal, that students will use in their decision making. The next chapter (Chapter 4) will look at the role of peer-to-peer communication in preparing students for mobility.

The report will then consider the mobility application process (Chapter 5) in terms of its various stages and any best practice (Chapter 6) that has been identified in the research surveys, including examples of good practice in the support available to students. It will also present ways to address the barriers to mobility that can occur, how they can be remedied and how a platform such as the Compass Platform may help in this respect.

The next 3 chapters (Chapters 7, 8, 9) will look at the Compass Platform, the security and privacy issues that were considered in developing the platform and the support and training to be put in place for users of the platform.

Penultimately, the report will provide a checklist (Chapter 10) for HEIs and student associations to use when preparing students for mobility, based on the conclusions of the two research reports, and how using the Compass Platform for that purpose could be of benefit to them.

The last chapter (Chapter 11) provides further information on Compass Project resources.

1.3 Project partners



Chapter 2: Structure of research surveys

We conducted two research surveys to assess current practices of HEIs and other stakeholders for informing students about mobility options and procedures and to gain insights into student expectations and needs when preparing their mobility. The first was a study of student opinions, experience and expectations and the second was a study of stakeholder (HEI and student associations) practices and support in preparing students for mobility.

For both studies we used a mixed method approach (quantitative and qualitative study). For the research on student expectations, we sent out questionnaires to European students (more than 1200 respondents) and conducted more than 30 semi-structured interviews with students from different European countries. For the study on stakeholder practices, we sent out an online survey to European HEI mobility coordinators/officers and international relations directors/officers, as well as to student associations, and received answers from almost 140 respondents. For the qualitative part of this research we reached out to the same intended public from five different countries (Austria, Croatia, Finland, France and UK). We conducted around 30 interviews that allowed us to further explore the conclusions gathered through the quantitative study.

For the student research, we defined four different target groups of students, so as to better understand how they prepare prior to mobility and how they experienced retrospectively the preparation phase of mobility. We also looked at why students decided to quit a mobility whilst in the preparation phase. We, therefore, had the following target groups:

- Local students preparing for mobility: We asked about the support that helped them to decide, the factors that delayed an informed decision, as well as about what kind of information or support they still were lacking.
- International students on mobility: We looked at what influenced them in their mobility choices, what helped them in their decision-making, what information and support they felt they were lacking in their preparation phase.
- Local students back from mobility: We asked them similar questions but with a focus on their already undertaken mobility experience.
- Students quitting mobility: We wanted to know why they abandoned their mobility application (e.g. lack of support and guidance, lack of comprehension of the experience of mobility, lack of financial support, etc) and what could have helped them to continue.

The data and analysis in the next four chapters is based on the quantitative and qualitative surveys and interviews undertaken within the project.

Chapter 3: Information sources and channels

The student research looked at students in four groups to obtain a perspective on preparation for mobility not only from those in the preparation phase, but also those on mobility and those who had returned from mobility. It was also decided to survey those students who had initially chosen to take up mobility and then did not do so.

Table 1 shows the sources of information which were used by students planning to go on mobility in ranked order. Though they considered ‘the international office or study abroad office’ as the most useful and most reliable source, the ranking also shows the importance of peer-to-peer sources, such as ‘students having returned from mobility’ and ‘students on mobility’.

Table 1: Information sources

	Preparing for mobility	On mobility	Returned from mobility	Given up mobility
1	International office	International office	International office	International office
2	Friends	Friends	Students back from mobility	Fellow students
3	Students back from mobility	Students back from mobility	Friends	Students back from mobility
4	Fellow students	Fellow students	Fellow students	Friends

Other information source categories included family, student organisations, international student fairs, foreign authorities, local authorities, future employers and other formal and informal sources.

Table 2 shows the channels of information used by students planning to go on mobility, again in ranked order. They considered the most useful and reliable channels to be ‘websites’ with ‘social media’ and ‘personal information’ (which included face to face and telephone) as important.

Table 2: Information channels

	Preparing for mobility	On mobility	Returned from mobility	Given up mobility
1	Website	Website	Website	Website
2	Social media	Social media	Social media	Personal information
3	Personal information	Personal information	Friends	Social media
4	Word of mouth	Word of mouth	Word of mouth	Printed material

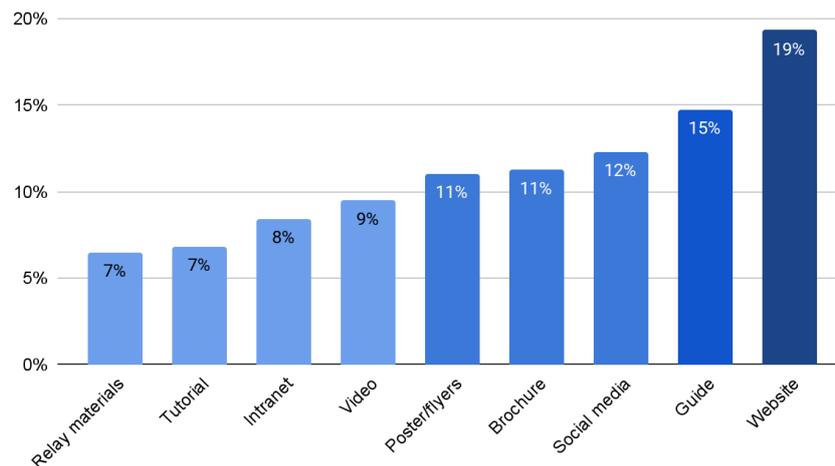
Other information channels in the survey included television and radio. Interestingly, printed materials, which included brochures and leaflets, did not figure highly. Those students who had quit a mobility seemed to rely on more formal channels and less on friends and word of mouth.

Both tables clearly show that peer-to-peer communication between students is a key element in the preparation phase of students making decisions on mobility

destinations. Unsurprisingly, websites and international and study abroad offices remained relevant as an information source.

The stakeholder research provided an insight into the resources and communications channels which HEIs believed were important to students. They are shown in Graph 1.

Graph 1: Most used means of communication by stakeholders

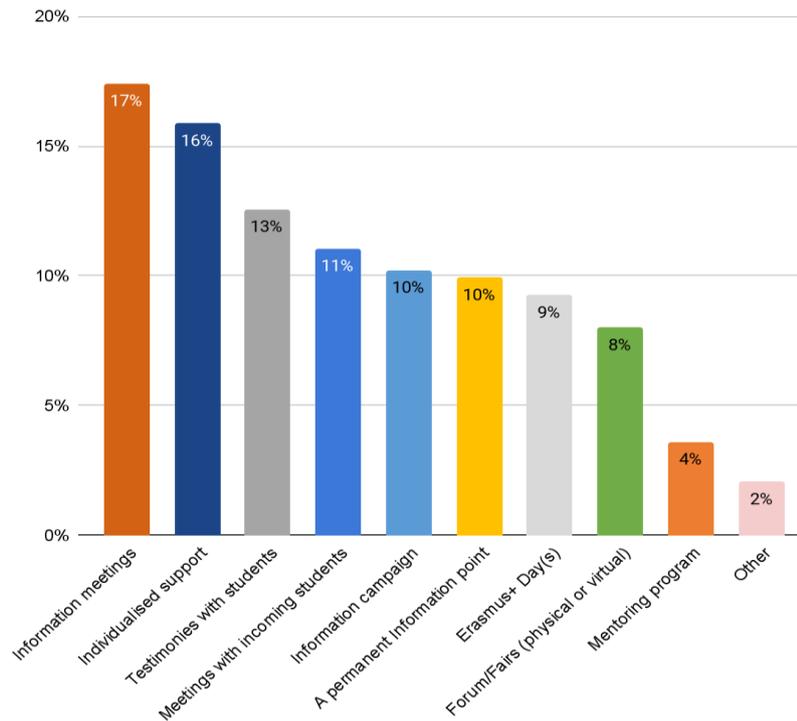


It is of interest that HEIs believe that the more formal channels and resources are essential for students and which correspond to what they offer to students. It is principally HEIs which interact with students in the orientation and preparation phase, whilst student associations become more involved in later stages of the process, when participants have chosen their destination institution. HEIs also believe that students in terms of information channels most appreciate tutorials, posters and flyers, social media content and brochures.

However, if we compare stakeholder perceptions with the above student research data, we find that stakeholder perceptions are at odds with resources and channels most appreciated by students in all four survey groups (preparing on mobility, while on mobility, back from mobility or who have quit mobility).

The following two graphs further illustrate this point in terms of activities that promote mobility in terms of HEI staff perceptions of what students appreciate the most. Graph 2 shows the relative importance of a range of activities promoting mobility as perceived by stakeholders in the research:

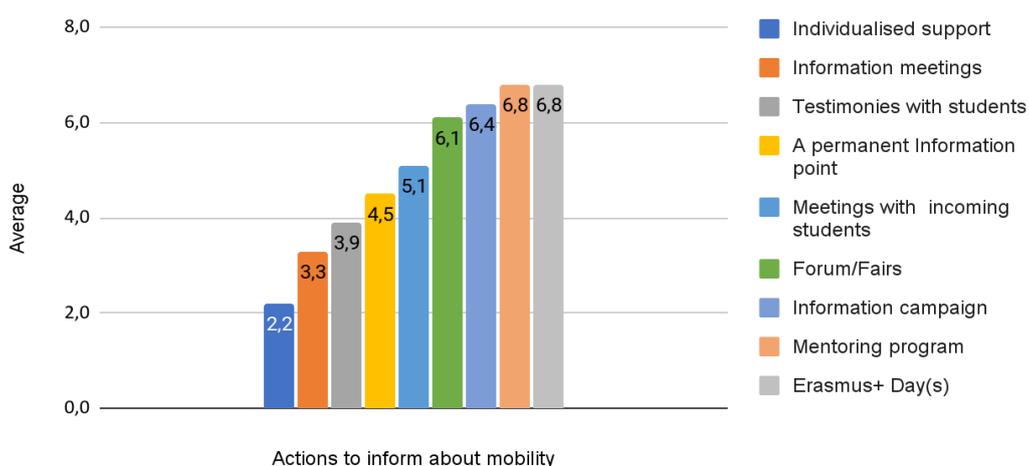
Graph 2: Activities organised by stakeholders to promote mobility



Information meetings, individual support, student testimonies and meetings with incoming exchange students are the main activities put in place by stakeholders (mainly HEIs) as shown by more than half of respondents.

However, in Graph 3 we can compare the above perceptions of stakeholders in terms of activities to promote mobility with the activities which are most appreciated by students.

Graph 3: Activities perceived as most appreciated by students (averages)

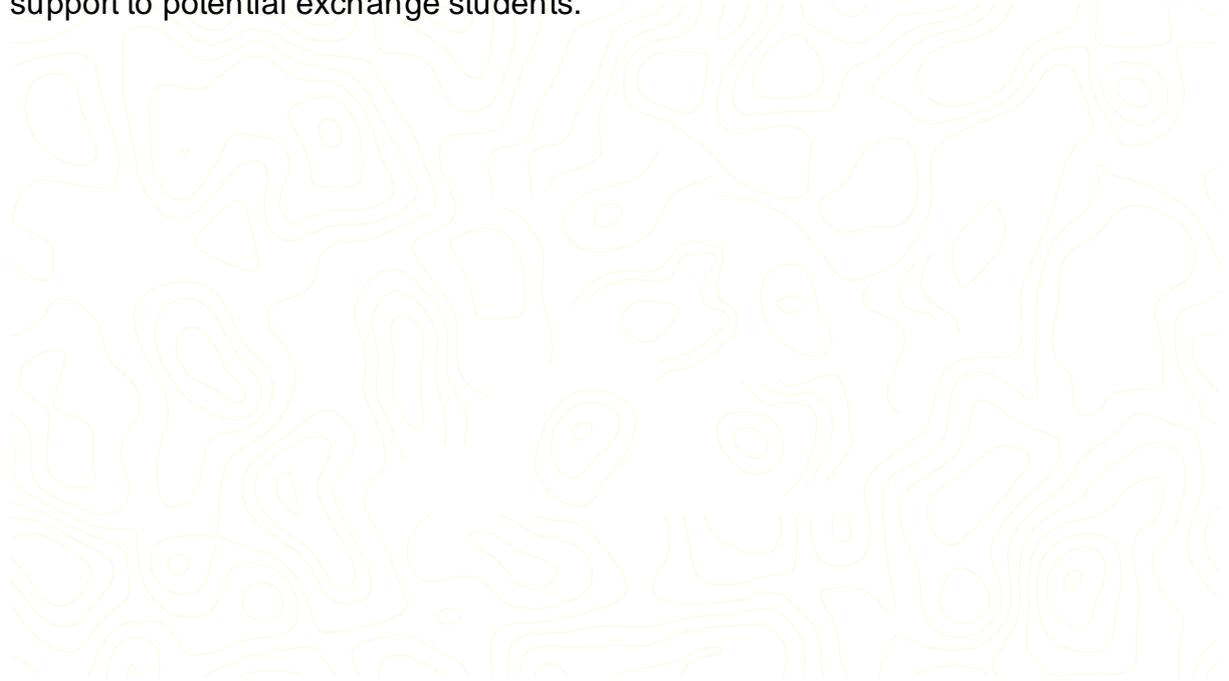


These survey findings show the inconsistency and divergence of stakeholder perceptions (HEIs principally) in terms of the needs of students, the means of communication which they perceive students to appreciate and the activities which

students most appreciate. In fact, students most appreciate mentoring programmes, Erasmus+ days (information days), information campaigns and forums and fairs. Seemingly, these are the activities that are the least offered by HEIs. It could be that such activities are more work intensive in busy international and study abroad offices with high workloads and lack of resources.

This is an important result of the research which shows that a better 'matching' of student needs and stakeholder support should be considered by HEIs and student associations and the range of activities adjusted to better serve and reflect student needs.

It also illustrates the role of (and need for) peer-to-peer communication between students as a key element in the orientation and preparation phase of student decision-making on mobility destinations. It also demonstrates how a platform such as that of the Compass Project may help and support students in this respect as well as helping HEIs and student associations in the delivery of information, advice and support to potential exchange students.



Chapter 4: Importance of peer-to-peer communication in mobility

In the student survey we investigated the role of peers and the importance of peer support in the decision-making of future students on mobility. According to the students, they were highly motivated to go abroad, if they had contact with peers studying abroad with positive experiences and up-to-date information on host institutions, courses and social life in the country of destination. Past experiences of peers in a certain country seem to be highly important to some students, as they prefer to go to a place where other students had been before.

In contrast, some students also complained about not having sufficient support from experienced peers. They would have liked, for example, in their preparation phase to have a student from the host institution who leads them through the courses and shows them the different places and functions of the host institution. Answers showed that institutional support, but also support from peers, is currently not perfectly available and could be further developed. Accordingly, students who gave up a mobility mentioned that the lack of support from peers was one reason for quitting.

The role of peers is significant in many ways: They influence the motivation to go abroad, they support in the planning process, they inform about studies abroad when coming back from their own mobility (as testimonies or buddies). They are considered as being trustworthy and reliable and can be asked questions differently than official staff from university. Making contact with students coming back from mobility or on mobility is a big wish from many international students. They could also be 'student ambassadors', mentors or buddies for the students planning to go on mobility. Sharing information with experienced peers in different tools or occasions should be possible. The Compass Platform should be a tool for finding other international students with the same mindset.

The Compass Platform could help students to get a better and realistic picture on mobility projects by providing formal and informal information that is relevant. Different means to reach this aim were discussed by students in this context, e.g. features like testimonies, chats, forums, options for one-on-one-communication and occasions for regular communication with experienced peers as well as personal contact opportunities with 'accredited' student ambassadors.

The stakeholder study confirms the significance of peer-to-peer communication when preparing students to go on mobility. HEIs and student associations identify many benefits such as access to testimonies from other students, reassuring students preparing for mobility as well as mutual help between students. They also see in the peer-to-peer interaction a complementary support to their own work in guiding students in the preparation phase of mobility.

Currently, stakeholders use different methods to put former mobility students together with students aiming to go on mobility. Most frequently, they organise testimony (case study) meetings or make available former mobility student emails. Some also use automated or non-automated matching tools. The major challenges faced by the stakeholders to implement a peer-to-peer approach are data protection and the recruiting and engagement of former mobility students. These issues will be further explored in Chapters 8 and 9.

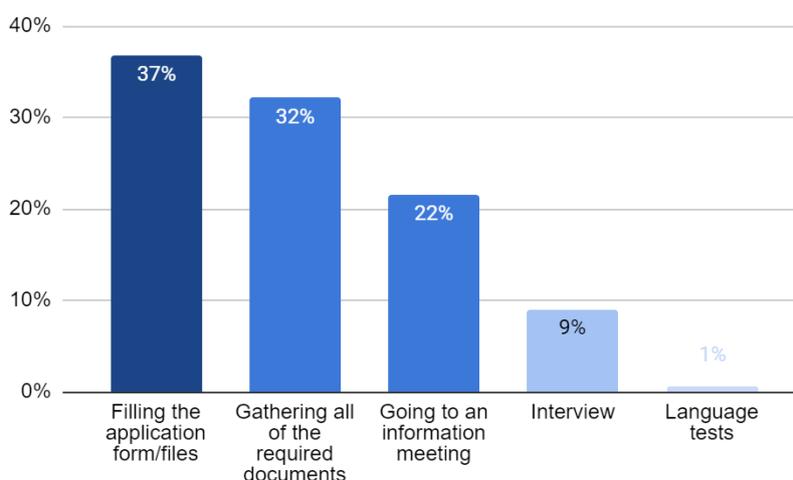
Chapter 5: Application process for going on mobility

The application process for students undertaking mobility is complex and involves a number of stages from initial enquiry to assessing possibilities, to application, the offer of a place and nomination to the partner institution, and then application to the now host institution which may include application for visa, health insurance and residential accommodation.

The stakeholder research identified what might be termed as a 'life cycle' of informing students about mobility. Here, home HEIs are the main stakeholder involved in supporting students, whilst student associations offer a greater role later in the application process, when the mobility destination has already been chosen. The 'life cycle' may well start when students join the HEI making them aware of mobility opportunities. However, it more formally occurs at induction the year prior to mobility, whilst in the preparation and application phases it involves a range of in person and online events, such as study abroad fairs and forums, and information meetings and utilises various means of communication. Later in the cycle, it will involve more individualised student support and a pre-departure meeting.

The research identified in Graph 4 the following most common steps included in the application process.

Graph 4: Most common application process steps undertaken by HEIs

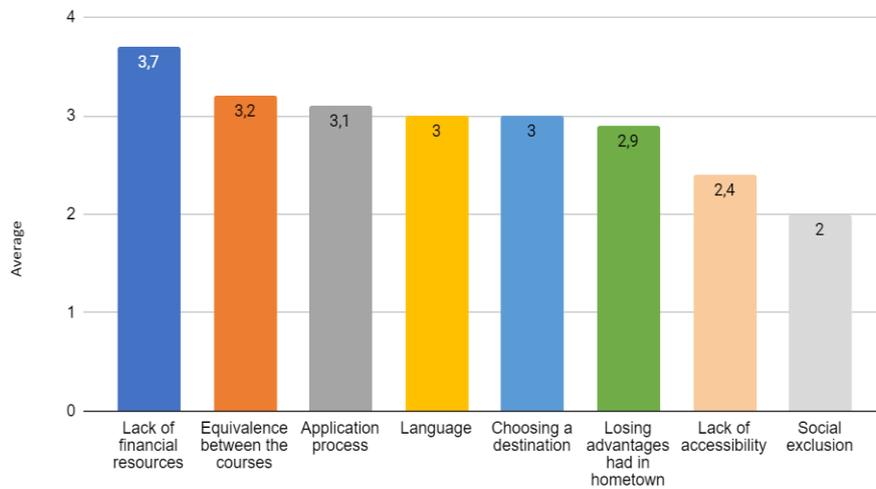


In the stakeholder survey, respondents identified the most common stages of the application process to be completing an application form and gathering all the required documentation. In addition, just under a quarter considered attending an information meeting to be valuable, both not necessarily part of the application process, whilst a small number thought an interview to be necessary to complete an application.

In addition, respondents were asked to rate difficulties encountered by students in preparing for mobility. In Graph 5, we can see that, amongst all relevant factors, the application process itself, equivalent course matching and lack of financial resources are key determinants. In this context, a number of actions have been put in place by stakeholders, such as information meetings about funding and personalised support. The fear of social exclusion is also one difficulty that students face and that

stakeholders can help alleviate through language and intercultural training and a pre-departure meeting.

Graph 5: Main difficulties identified by students in preparation phase



A number of areas of difficulty and concern have been identified which students encounter in preparing for mobility. In summary, stakeholders can help to smooth the process of application through the following measures:

- A lack of financial resources for mobility is a concern of most students and here HEIs can help by identifying costs of living in the host country and at the host university, so students know what to budget, and also by the home university clearly presenting sources of funding be it national grants or loans or Erasmus or Turing funding support.
- The equivalence between courses is an area which was highlighted by students in that they need to 'match' modules at the host university with modules at their home university. There is clearly a lack of exact information in terms of courses provided by host universities to enable students to undertake this without having to make further iterations or last minute changes on arrival at the host university. HEIs could provide improved and up-to-date course catalogues, primarily on their websites.
- A fear of social exclusion is experienced by most students. Here good orientation and induction procedures and a buddy scheme can offer personal support to ease settling in. Intercultural training at a pre-departure meeting can help students integrate and manage 'culture shock'.
- The application process is complex and has a number of stages dealing with home and host universities and at the latter probably different departments, such as the international office, faculty and accommodation service. The management of this process by international and study abroad offices is key.
- Accommodation at the host university is a major area of concern. In some universities, it will be housing in university accommodation and in others

assistance in providing off campus housing. This is an area where informal student advice and a buddy scheme can help settling in.

- For students travelling to or outside of the EU, the visa process can be complex, uncertain and costly. Here again, both home and particularly host universities can better support students through the process.

In the student survey, there were in addition a number of areas which were identified as those of potential improvement:

- A lack or poor communication between the student and home and host universities, and also between home and host universities.
- A reduction in the administrative burden and standardisation of application procedures.
- The provision of a checklist through the application process and perhaps at the pre-departure meeting a 'to do' list for both prior to departure and whilst on mobility, and a list of things they need to pack to take with them.
- The support of a buddy to help in preparing for mobility as well as for onboarding to the host university.

It is believed the Compass Platform can help in preparing for mobility in terms of identifying and selecting a partner university to attend, and then later in the application cycle by providing more detailed 'informal' information about the host university, city and country through peer-to-peer communication.

Chapter 6: Best practice in supporting students going on mobility

The most positive feedback from students stemmed from planning situations where students received substantial **(individual) support from higher education institutions** and other stakeholders involved in the planning process. Whenever **cooperation between universities** succeeded, it positively impacted the level of satisfaction of students planning their mobility. The role of universities is also crucial when it comes to promoting mobility. It is essential that universities show and **offer opportunities and motivate** students to go abroad. This is the first step for a successful information and orientation phase of students planning to go abroad.

Students are especially grateful when they receive support and **help with their paperwork**, and when they obtain quickly all the information and advice they need. The **learning agreement** is a central part of the application and preparation process. Some home universities (and host universities) respond already to the needs of many students to be as best as possible by assisting in completion of this document. A well elaborated learning agreement encourages students afterwards to succeed in their semester or year abroad.

It is highly advisable to use all the resources and expertise already existing. The **competences and expertise of experienced students** after or during their own mobility is readily available. However, it is not systematically used so far. The work of such ambassador students is highly valuable. The question of whether it should be rewarded extrinsically or not is not easily answered. It also depends on personal preferences. There is a huge willingness and consent to engage oneself in helping other students in their orientation phase, after having come back from one's own mobility. At the same time, ideas linked to rewarding this engagement are divergent. However, there is a high consensus in terms of survey feedback that in principle it should remain as a part of volunteering.

In conclusion, there is a huge desire within the student community to simplify the planning and application procedure. In this respect, the idea of **one single platform as a principal source of information and orientation** in the planning process appeared to be very attractive to students.

Chapter 7: Compass Platform: Why Compass is different ?

The Compass Platform is the result of a co-constructed project between youth organisations (Erasmus Student Networks) and HEIs. As such, it was designed by young people for young people with the help of mobility experts within HEIs which makes this tool appropriate for quality peer-to-peer communication. By providing a peer-to-peer platform for 'informal' information it can particularly help often overburdened international and study abroad offices by answering many questions from potential students which would otherwise arrive at their door.

The platform is easy to operate, the design is modern and intuitive which helps usability. The search browser works with filters, which makes it even more simple to scan results, and the user can already focus on the type of information desired. It has been limited in scope to one purpose: **to help students make an informed decision about their host country, city or university and give them tips to prepare with peace of mind through testimonies.** As social media platforms, such as Meta, are almost no longer used by the applicant generation, the Compass Platform can be an interesting alternative. However, the platform does not replace social media, as users can freely decide to be contacted through their Instagram, Facebook or Twitter account, for instance.

Whilst searching for information about international mobility, students often need the viewpoints and insights of other students because of the higher trustworthiness and the more convincing feedback from real life experience. This is what students are looking for. The informal tone used is also a strength of this platform because it creates a feeling of belonging and a space for contributors to freely express themselves and give the type of information they want: practical tips, expressing a feeling or sharing a specific experience. In addition, users can react or comment on the different posts.

This tool is complementary to others - it does not replace more formal tools used by international and study abroad offices, but can help make their work easier by capitalising on the strengths of peer-to-peer communication. However, to be effective, relevant and accepted, the Compass Platform will need the endorsement and promotion of HEIs and student associations as a trusted and accredited source.

In summary, the platform offers students:

- A tool created by young people for young people;
- A tool with one purpose and one goal;
- A platform which is both modern and intuitive.

The link to the platform: <https://compass-youthmobility.eu/>

Chapter 8: Platform security and privacy issues

8.1 Platform requirements

The major issues faced by stakeholders in implementing a peer-to-peer approach to mobility communication through such a platform are data protection requirements and the recruitment and engagement of former mobility students.

Platform development therefore needed to address the following requirements:

- The security and privacy of data had to be ensured.
- The topicality, accuracy and completeness of information should be guaranteed. It needs to be up-to-date, trusted and relevant.
- The simplicity of information and guidance on the platform should be an objective in platform design.
- The reliability of information and testimonies has to be secured through the recruitment of 'accredited', reliable and trustworthy (student) representatives at host and/or home universities, including local student ambassadors or buddies.
- Authenticity of information and authorised persons in charge are key requirements of the platform. The online platform should be populated by authentic and credible experiences of students.

8.2 Moderation of platform

The platform is moderated by ESN France, which is the web developer and product owner. Each time an individual publishes a post or comment it needs to be **approved by the moderator**. Once the moderator has approved **4 posts or comments** from a user, this user's content is no longer moderated and posts/comments are automatically approved.

The platform will also be moderated by student ambassadors which will be trained and selected based on availability and motivation.

8.3 Documentation

The following documentation relates to the security of the platform:

1. [Terms and conditions](#): These terms and conditions have the purpose of governing access to and of use of the Platform. Here it is understood and recognised that Compass is not party to any agreement, contract or contractual relations, of any nature, entered into between the users of its Platform. By clicking 'Agree terms' when signing up, the user recognises having read carefully and accepted all these general conditions of use.
2. [Privacy policy](#): This privacy notice (together with our Terms and Conditions) sets out the basis on which personal data collected or provided by the user will be processed by us. The policy should be read carefully to understand our views and practices regarding your personal data and how we will treat it.
3. [The Charter](#): This Charter defines the usage rights and limits on the Compass Platform.

Chapter 9: Support for platform

9.1 Identified target groups

Following the development of the Compass Platform, the Compass Project consortium developed a strategy to ensure support of the platform. Indeed, there was a strong need to ensure that the platform would be continuously fed with testimonies from students to become a relevant tool in preparing for international student mobility. With that aim in mind, four key target groups were identified:

- **HEI staff:** The staff working inside the international office or study abroad office and in daily contact with young people, either preparing for mobility or returning from mobility. Having these stakeholders include information on the Compass Platform in their communications with students is crucial to ensure its relevance. They would also help with the identification and recruitment of ambassadors.
- **Ambassadors:** Students who have been on mobility, who know how the platform works, how to use it, and who are promoting it to both students preparing for their mobility and students returning from mobility. They are usually volunteers within HEIs and in student associations that are focused on helping international students, such as ESN sections.
- **Contributors:** Students who have recently returned from a mobility and who can share their experience using the Compass Platform.
- **Potential outgoing students:** Those interested in going on mobility and visiting the Platform to find the information they need to prepare themselves for mobility.

Once these four target groups have been identified, the consortium developed a strategy to ensure that they would be properly informed about the platform and have all the resources they would need to properly disseminate information about the platform, use it and recommend it. The strategy is set out below (9.2).

9.2 Informing HEI staff about the platform

For this target group, we decided that reaching out to them in two different ways would be appropriate:

- In order to inform HEIs about the existing platform the project consortium has developed a digital toolkit which includes promotion kits for both students going on mobility and students returning from it. Stakeholders will have everything on hand to reach out to students, as the toolkit will contain email templates, social media communication templates, and even training session outlines presenting the Compass Platform that they can use during welcome events, induction or other types of events targeting mobile students. This toolkit is available for download on the Compass Platform directly, but the Project consortium will also share it widely among its networks.
- HEIs will need to promote the platform to students. this initial action can have both indirect and direct benefits. It will reduce HEIs workload, it will create links with student associations, enable HEIs to vary their methodology to improve preparation for mobility, and will strengthen peer-to-peer interaction amongst students. Also, by using peer-to-peer methods and relying on returning student testimonies, this also empowers them to value their international mobility upon return.

- In order to help HEIs to promote the Compass Platform, the Project consortium has organised training for HEI staff eager to learn more about improving their support to students preparing to go on mobility. This means that tools and content have been created to support HEIs and can possibly be reused after the end of the project to ensure sustainability.

9.3 Informing ambassadors about the platform

- This target group also participated in the above-mentioned training. This allowed them to mix with HEI staff and brainstorm how they can cooperate better in future to help prepare students going on mobility. The invitation to training was widely shared amongst consortium networks, and to student associations particularly through ESN International, ESN France and ESN Italy. The toolkit allows HEIs and student associations to share details of the Compass Platform with their student ambassadors.
- The toolkit will be beneficial for ambassadors, as they will be able to find all the necessary resources to promote the Compass Platform.

9.4 Informing contributors about the platform

- Students on mobility will be able to learn about the Compass Platform through various spaces: thanks to training and communication undertaken with HEI staff, they should receive information about the Compass Platform upon their return to their home universities, be it via email or social media. They will also be able to find information directly from study abroad ambassadors and via student associations. HEIs usually organise welcome back events or debriefing sessions when students return from mobility and through these students will be able to learn about the Compass Platform and possibly apply for an ambassador role.
- Once they have heard about the Compass Platform, and are interested in leaving their testimonies, they will find on the Platform a complete FAQ and a step-by-step tutorial on how to write an impactful testimony.

9.5 Informing potential outgoing students about the platform

- Students preparing to go on mobility are always eager to find as much information as possible to prepare themselves. Through the targeted communication of HEI staff and ambassadors, they will receive information about the Compass Platform and will be able to easily register, create their own profile and browse through testimonies.

Chapter 10: Checklist to provide best support to students preparing to go on mobility - the conclusions of the Compass Project

The Compass Project research reached a variety of interesting conclusions based on how HEI staff can better review their own procedures to support students and understand how they can be improved. This checklist intends to list all topics that may be considered for improvement, including the research conclusions that may justify their inclusion.

10.1 Funding mobility projects

- **Collaborating with funding agencies and local governments**

Maintain a close collaboration with funding agencies and local governments. Provide clear information to students about funding options and procedures and clarify any doubts upstream.

Funding agencies and local governments are in the upstream of the student mobility process. Therefore, it is essential that HEIs collaborate with them to ensure the best financial support is available to students. Furthermore, these organisations can also support HEIs to clarify any doubts relating to the eligibility of students to particular funds that are available.

- **Ensuring the availability of adequate information of extra funding to students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups**

Be alert to the needs of students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups: ensure they have enough available information to assure them the mobility experience is possible and interesting.

The clearer the information available to students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups on the type of support they can receive and its requirements, the higher the chance they will consider the possibility of undertaking an international student mobility. This may be an effort that does not reap benefits right away, as these students may have additional barriers that prevent them from going on mobility. However, by improving the mobility information process to better support them, the chances of targeting more of those students will certainly increase.

10.2 Dissemination of mobility opportunities

- **Diversification of channels and sources**

Use as many different channels and sources as possible to reach a more diverse audience.

In order to achieve ambitious goals of the number of students undertaking a mobility period abroad, HEIs have an essential role in disseminating the opportunities that are available and ensuring students are enticed by them. Therefore, the diversification of channels and sources used is of the utmost importance. Best practices in this field mention that communication around these topics should start much earlier than the opening of the application period to achieve maximum impact. Therefore, HEIs should aim to include information about international student mobility in documents and communication targeting first year students.

- **Informal channels (e.g. social media, etc)**

Go where students are - use social media to your advantage.

In line with diversification of channels, informal channels should play a significant role in communication of mobility opportunities. The Compass Project research on the needs of students preparing to go on mobility asserts the fact that this target group values and even prefers the use of informal channels to receive this type of information.

- **Peer feedback**

Include peer feedback in mobility communication to encourage more students to go on mobility.

Make sure access to peer feedback is streamlined.

The importance of peer feedback in motivating and advocating students to go on mobility is something that should be considered by all HEIs. Its benefits are undeniable, but sometimes collecting and ensuring this feedback is available might be exacting on overburdened international and study abroad offices. One of the ways to streamline this and complement other activities is by disseminating the [Compass Platform](#) to students, where they will find peer feedback from and dialogue with students from all over Europe.

- **Updating the website**

Ensure the website containing information on mobility procedures is updated and user friendly.

Through the Compass Project research on HEI communication and procedures, we noticed that there is a mismatch on the perception of HEIs of website importance: it was deemed by HEIs staff as one of the information channels students appreciated the least, whilst it was the most appreciated channel in the student survey. This means that the importance of websites cannot be overlooked, and therefore it is essential that the information contained is regularly updated. An additional step would be to ensure the website is user-friendly and the information is easily available and reachable, and in particular the provision of course catalogues.

- **Events in a changing world**

Organise different kinds of mobility preparation events.

Make sure to have a Plan B.

The Covid pandemic has had an immense impact on higher education in general, and on international student mobility in particular. This challenge prompted international and study abroad offices to move their practices to an online format, and they did so quite well, according to our research on stakeholder practices to support students planning to go on mobility. This ability to adapt to circumstances is essential to maintain a certain level of normality and continuity of mobility.

- **More online events (present ideas for different events)**

Moving some of the mobility dissemination events to an online format can ensure that information reaches more students. It can also streamline the information giving process for international and study abroad offices in making sure they can reach many places at the same time (e.g. a simple online session can be streamed and available for several faculties within a university). The list below may serve as an inspiration to increase and vary the possible online events to disseminate mobility:

- (a) Cultural sessions to showcase the country destinations available for mobility and inviting students as speakers that are on mobility in that country and/or incoming students from that country;
- (b) 'Ask me anything' sessions, where students can pose any question about mobility procedures, studying abroad, etc. Speakers could include an academic exchange coordinator, an international mobility coordinator and students who have already gone on mobility;
- (c) An 'Everything you need to know about mobility grants' session, specifically on funding and the support students can receive, as well as the requirements they may need to comply with.

10.3 Pre-departure

- **Collaboration with host HEIs**

Ensure close collaboration with host HEIs for a better mobility experience for both outgoing and incoming students.

Home and host HEIs are essential pieces in the student mobility puzzle. Therefore, their collaboration can have a tremendous impact on the mobility experience. Having open lines of communication with an HEI that will receive students from your university, getting to know its contacts and processes and the support available to students and ensuring the right people on both sides know each other's roles will definitely improve the support both HEIs provide to their students.

- **Academic exchange coordinators**

Maintain a close collaboration and communication with academic exchange coordinators in faculties.

The academic staff are the ones that keep regular contact with students through their lectures, which is a great asset for advising students about mobility. Some of them have the role of an academic exchange coordinator, which in general terms means that they will ensure equivalences between the home and host HEIs course catalogues. In many cases, they may well be the adviser who approves the learning agreement for a particular student mobility. Therefore, it is the responsibility of mobility staff to maintain a good collaboration with them.

- **Mobility procedures (e.g. grant application, approval of learning agreement, etc)**

Provide clear information about the mobility procedures that students will have to go through to prepare their student mobility.

The mobility staff is responsible for informing the student in the preparation phase about the key documents that need to be signed. They include a student learning agreement and the grant agreement, among others.

“The purpose of the Learning Agreement is to provide a transparent and efficient preparation of the exchange to make sure that students receive recognition for the activities successfully completed abroad.”¹

Home and host staff members should be able to identify, interpret and apply information on mobility programmes (ECTS, relevant changes, etc.). Further, they should understand and interpret their home institution structures, strategies, developments and procedures (relating to educational policy, student affairs and services, quality assurance mechanisms, marketing and communication, financial policy)².

- **Risk assessment**

Include a personal risk assessment in mobility procedures to increase awareness and preparation by students.

Ensuring that students are aware of any potential risks that they may have to face whilst on mobility and having control measures already thought through is an important preventive measure that can effectively reduce the impact of any issues that mobility students may have to deal with. Therefore, it is highly recommended to include a travel risk assessment in the HEI mobility procedure, not only to support students in being better prepared for their mobility, but also to hopefully reduce any incidents whilst on mobility. This risk assessment can consider different topics, such as accommodation, communication (preventive measures in place, in case a phone is stolen or electricity outage), pre-existing medical conditions, minor injuries, natural hazards particular to the location, etc.

- **Checklists for student departure**

Provide a detailed checklist for students and check the available other HEI examples.

A checklist can be useful not only for staff members, but also for students. Some HEIs create their own checklists and make them available to students on their websites, so students can follow in a more structured way the mobility procedure before, during and after their mobility.

Example: The [checklist](#) of Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

- **Check the ultimate Erasmus checklist in the Erasmus+ app**

1

<https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/mobility-and-learning-agreements/learning-agreements>

² <https://fesc-project.eu/framework/student-related-tasks-before-mobility/inform-students-about-and-support-mobility>

The [Ultimate Erasmus checklist](#) is a very helpful tool for students to prepare for their Erasmus+ mobility experience, making sure they do not miss any steps of the process.

- **Compass Platform**

Use the Compass Platform as a way to decrease the workload related with provision of peer feedback.

The Compass Platform is a long-awaited tool, the aim of which is to help students prepare for their mobility by putting them in contact with students who have already undertaken a mobility at, or with local students of, the desired institution or destination. In order to connect international students with local students, the platform allows them to post testimonies about the country, city or university where they are a local student or where they have been an international student on mobility. To publish testimonies, the platform suggests tags on various subjects, such as #accommodation, #studentlife, #finance etc. This platform will help support not only staff working in international and study abroad offices, but also any stakeholder departments related to student mobility support.

10.4 Mobility

- **Collaborating with stakeholders**

Increase collaboration with other stakeholders: share the administrative burden whilst giving different perspectives to students.

It is known that collaboration between stakeholders is not standardised. However, the Compass Project stakeholder research showed clearly that during the orientation and preparation phase, HEIs collaborate the most with other HEIs (30%) and national agencies (25%). Less usually during the orientation phase, and more often in the mobility preparation phase, student associations (16%) and accommodation organisations (9%) also intervene alongside HEIs with students. In this and in other research, it is suggested that increasing the collaboration between HEIs and student associations will be beneficial for the students. Therefore, mobility staff could revise their practices in connecting with student organisation representatives and ensure that there is a constant dialogue and sharing of information and good practice.

10.5 Back from mobility

- **Evaluating the mobility support process**

Create evaluation procedures for students returning from mobility.

Use evaluation analysis and conclusions to update website and mobility preparation procedures.

Understanding the views of students returning from mobility can be an invaluable contribution to the work of international and study abroad offices as they will gain a clear idea on what needs to be improved and what is highly valued by the main users of their services. From the Compass Project research on stakeholder practices when supporting students preparing to go on mobility, we understand that a high percentage of offices do not have an evaluation procedure per se. However, it is highly recommended that this becomes a standardised measure that will certainly bring fruitful conclusions and promote

the continuous improvement of mobility processes. The evaluation can cover different topics, such as dissemination and communication of mobility opportunities, support provided by staff, clarity of information and the mobility experience at host institutions.

- **Debriefing returning mobility students**

*Organise a debriefing with returning mobility students.
Make sure to collect their feedback.*

The return from mobility can be a challenging time when students need to acclimatise to their return after having experienced a quite important moment in their academic lives. More than that, their experiences are extremely valuable and they are thus knowledge vessels that international and study abroad offices need to take advantage of. In order to do so, a debriefing with them would be a great moment to gain their feedback and possibly to use them to inspire students who are considering going on mobility. It could therefore be interesting to organise, for example, a 'welcome back' event where returning mobility students share their views and opinions on their mobility experience, and where students considering undertaking this experience can get answers to their questions through the preferred method: peer-to-peer feedback. Returning students can also become ambassadors and in that role can assist in monitoring the Compass Platform.

- **Encouraging returning mobility students to post their feedback on the Compass Platform**

Use the Compass Platform as a way for returning mobility students to give back to others.

As previously explained, the Compass Platform is a helpful tool for students to find the best information about their planned study abroad from first-hand student experience. However, mobility staff plays a crucial role in spreading the word about the existence of this platform and in making it a truly valuable asset with as much content and users as possible.

Chapter 11: Further information

The project consortium has produced two reports which provide a full analysis of the project research. It is also producing more practical support in the form of a training toolkit and recommendation booklet. These will all be available on the [Compass Platform Website](#).

The project will therefore raise awareness among stakeholders supporting students going on mobility of challenges and potential improvements and encourage them to review and analyse the support they currently offer. An expected further outcome of the project will be to engender a stronger collaboration between HEIs and student associations in the provision of support to incoming and outgoing students.

Reports

Compass Project Study Report: Expectations and needs of students preparing their mobility process (December 2021)

Compass Project Study Report: Research about stakeholders practices when helping students to prepare their mobility (January 2023)