

# **Pandemic Im/mobilities**

A report on the situation  
of international students  
at the Jagiellonian University  
in Kraków.

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# **Executive Summary**

## **About the Study**

The present report highlights potential ways of supporting international students during crisis situations in three spheres: organisational, educational, and socio-psychological well-being. This study was conducted from March-June 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic and state lockdown. Whilst this period was unique in its suddenness, scope, and intensity, the study reveals important challenges which go beyond this situation and point to institutional weaknesses which need to be addressed. Even though international students shared the experience of lockdown with local students in many respects, their mobility status brings different challenges, mostly due to lack of local language knowledge and access to information, weakness of social safety nets, as well as their legal status as foreigners. In this report we elaborate on these challenges and present an overview and set of recommendations.

## **Target Readers**

The report is aimed at international student support structures and decision-making bodies at the university level: International student offices, departmental coordinators and student service providers, mental health support services, as well as teaching support services. Additionally, it may be of use to academic teachers who are involved in international teaching programmes.

## **Methods and Sample**

Five focus groups and 7 individual in-depth interviews were conducted online between March and May 2020 with 29 international students at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow in diverse types of programmes – full-time stationary BA and MA programmes, Erasmus+ exchanges, and double or joint degree consortium programmes such as Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degrees. The sample consisted of 18 women and 11 men, from diverse faculties, both from EU and non-EU countries. 15 participants continued living or remained in Poland upon lockdown, while 14 went back to their home countries or other localities. Additionally, four expert interviews were conducted with those who manage programmes for international students at programme and university levels, and those who run the university centre for psychological support.

## **Highlights of the Analysis**

The most important challenges international students have faced during the COVID-19 lockdown:

- Precariousness of mobility status: difficulties, particularly for non-EU students, in accessing information about legitimizing their stay, lack of streamlined information about border closures, difficulties with acknowledgement of financial grants and scholarships, dealing with administrative hurdles such as signing up for classes remotely.
- Limited / piecemeal access to information about public services, particularly health care
- Overload of course materials without appropriate online didactic methods.
- Low levels of concentration, lack of motivation, high anxiety and undeveloped / halted social networks.

## **The good practices / experiences highlighted by students:**

- Approachability and support of administrative staff and academic teachers, including consultations, empathy, responsiveness to emails, telephones.
- Prompt switch to online technological tools, including teaching and learning platforms.

## **Main Recommendations**

- ‘One-stop-shop’: a centralised, online information access point for international students with up-to-date information, translated documents and links to essential services, including how to proceed in case of emergency.
- Teacher training: a comprehensive system of teacher training to suit blended / online formats, with an emphasis on student-centred, active methods.
- Mental-health awareness campaign and development of support structures to accompany international students.

# 1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic caused upheaval for students and university faculty and staff alike. As the effects of the global health crisis and its aftermath unravel, it is clear that educational systems are in need of evidence-based analysis and international policy experiences to develop effective responses to organisational and educational challenges faced by both domestic and international students. The evidence gathered from the presented research shows that international students who had strong institutional support from university structures and their programme management were able to cope with uncertainties and difficulties better than their peers who lacked such support. Strong institutional support from university structures may play a critical role in minimising the impact of future crises on international students' well-being and help them to quickly adapt to new situations and requirements.

This study focuses on the particularity of international students during this pandemic period, who largely define their educational experiences through mobility and social networks made in transnational spaces (Beech 2019; Cairns et al. 2018; Cuzzocrea et al. 2021; Czerska-Shaw & Krzaklewska 2021). The sudden suspension of the core of their educational experiences placed these individuals in spatial and social limbo, creating an environment likened to the concept of 'waithood' (Honwana 2014), which refers to the situation of young people stuck between youth and adulthood, unable to move forward with life plans because of socio-economic constraints. The situation of the pandemic has been a longer than anticipated waithood 'moment', which has revealed both individual and structural challenges, but also some opportunities. The present report highlights the structural challenges and makes recommendations on this basis whilst strengthening them with individual narratives and experiences.

It is important to note at the outset that our study is exploratory in nature and that we do not intend to generalise the experiences of our respondents to all international students, or even to all those studying at the Jagiellonian University. In fact, during our research it became clear that the term 'international student' carries with it a certain positive, privileged, but also temporal connotation, and some students missed the opportunity to take part in the focus groups because they did not identify with this category. This includes those international students who study in Polish, and who are largely out of the social networks based around Erasmus and other exchange programmes. This points to a limitation of the study but also a need to further explore the potential challenges that these types of international students may face, as well as the weaknesses or even lack of support structures to cater to them.

Having this in mind, the aim of this study was to take stock of and track the experiences of different types of international students studying at the Jagiellonian University at the time of the first pandemic lockdown between March and June 2020, in order to analyse the challenges and opportunities they faced in three dimensions: organisational, educational, as well as psychological well-being. The findings of the study have served to make recommendations to university structures, programme managers and academic teachers which may in turn serve to strengthen institutional support and channels of communication, as well as improve teaching and learning experiences in an international setting.

The present report first provides a brief background to the study, followed by the analytical framework, a description and justification of methods used and an analysis of findings together with recommendations in the three aforementioned categories: organisational and administrative issues, educational experiences, and psychological well-being. We finish with conclusions and reflections on this unique pandemic moment, which points to the need for further exploration of international student mobility experiences and student support structures within higher education institutions. The report sheds light on the unassuming precariousness of international students' status, on the need to rethink teaching and learning methods and, importantly, on the alarming mental health issues that are surfacing in the wake of the global pandemic, particularly amongst young and mobile individuals, and the need to develop and expand support structures to help mitigate the effects on well-being.

## **2. Analytical Framework**

Our study is grounded in the discussion and concept of well-being. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO 1993: 1), quality of life is understood widely as an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. In this understanding, and as suggested by recent discussions around the WHO concept, well-being very broadly relates to diverse aspects on one's life and environment: psychological and physical health, social relations, level of independence as well as an evaluation of one's life environment, including financial situation or available infrastructure (Woźniak & Tobiasz-Adamczyk 2013).

In relation to this broad understanding, in our analysis we considered three dimensions of educational experiences that have posed challenges to well-being particularly in the context of the pandemic and in the space of international student mobility. While there has been a tendency to link the stress of international studies to the socio-cultural sphere, research highlights the psychological and physical dimensions as equally important (Krzaklewska & Skórska 2013). Along the same lines, our study points to the importance of the physical environment (infrastructure) for well-being, which is rarely considered in international student evaluations. The living and studying conditions in which students found themselves, quality of internet connections and technological tools, all became of critical importance in the pandemic context and highlighting the importance of university infrastructure for equal access to education.

The aspects that were considered in the three dimensions are as follows:

### **1. Organisational dimension**

- Access to information
- Visa/ residence permit issues
- Accommodation
- Access to health care and other public services
- Financial condition – stipends, work arrangements
- Living conditions, access to internet, computers

## 2. Educational dimension

- Distance learning tools, evaluation of teaching methods and approaches
- Access to educational resources, libraries or laboratories
- Learning support, academic tutoring
- Motivation for learning

## 3. Psychological / social well-being dimension

- Psychological support services
- Support from peers, other students, organisations, online groups
- Self-strategies for well-being

It is important to note that these three spheres are strongly interrelated and that their interconnections strengthened during the epidemic, or have at least become more visible, possibly due to the sudden overlapping of physical spheres – private life, education, social life – which were all happening in the same room or house, often simultaneously in the virtual sphere.

# 3. Research Methodology

The study was initiated with the introduction of lockdown in Poland on 20 March 2020. As a result of the introduction of the state of epidemiological emergency, higher education institutions were closed and all classes moved online, changing, possibly forever, the conditions for participation in higher education. To capture the crisis – its effects and reactions to these new conditions of learning, particularly in regard to mobile students – we decided to gather the voices of international students for whom the informal and social aspects within educational settings appear to constitute the core of the studying abroad experience (Krzaklewska 2013; Cairns et al. 2018). In this period diverse institutions also launched studies to describe and evaluate international student mobility in relation to the crisis (e.g. European Commission 2020, Erasmus Student Network 2020, for a systematic review of the studies see Krzaklewska & Şenyuva 2020). Our study fits into this body of research and may provide insight from a qualitative perspective.

Five focus groups and 7 individual in-depth interviews were conducted online between March and May 2020 with 29 international students at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow in diverse types of programmes – full-time stationary BA and MA programmes, Erasmus+ exchanges, and double or joint degree consortium programmes such as Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degrees. The choice to predominately use focus groups was a conscious one, as we wanted to encourage students to share their experiences also with each other, and in this way to jointly come up with recommendations based on their collective challenges. This also created a space for them to make sense of their situation, which for some was an important moment to connect with others and formulate their own solutions.

The sample consisted of 18 women and 11 men, from diverse faculties, both from the EU (e.g. France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Netherlands, Germany, Portugal, and Latvia) and non-EU countries (from China, Bangladesh, USA, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Belarus). The country of origin was a critical variable determining the experience of the pandemic lockdown, with non-EU students facing significantly more administrative/visa barriers and more difficulties to return home (cf. ESN 2020). In this report, we use the following format to code our respondents' quotes: (gender of respondent, region of origin (EU/non-EU), generic place of residence at the time of the interview). For example: (man, non-EU, back home).

As will be shown later, the decision to go back home or return was a critical point of their pandemic experience: 15 participants continued living or remained in Poland during lockdown, while 14 went back to their home countries or other localities. As many as 12 students had just recently arrived in Krakow (as the end of February marks the start of the semester), while the rest had been in the city for one semester and others for even a few years. We also had 4 respondents who were full-time international students in Krakow pursuing a joint master course and had gone abroad (or were supposed to go) to a partner university in the second semester.

Additionally, four expert interviews were conducted with those who manage programmes for international students at departmental and university levels, and those who run the university centre for psychological support (SOWA). The interviews opened up the institutional perspective of the crisis, highlighting the complexity of administrative procedures and lack of top-down information channels, the dependence on various external agencies in relation to information on scholarships and loans, legal status or educational recognition.

It is important to note the specificity of the international student body at the Jagiellonian University. Approximately 12% of all students at the JU are foreign nationals (see Table 1), with the majority coming from Ukraine and often studying within full degree programmes, followed by Norwegians routinely engaged in medicine programmes. Beyond those students engaged in a course of study in Polish and often coming from Eastern European countries, another important share of students constitutes those who come for courses run in English within degree programmes or through consortium and bi-lateral agreements, like Erasmus Mundus. Within these diverse frameworks, students study in Krakow for various lengths of time – from a few months to 3 years. The third crucial group are exchange students (about 1000 students each year), in particular ERASMUS+ students who are on exchange for one or two semesters from other European countries (about 800), the Erasmus K107 programme with students arriving from the around the world, or students visiting through bilateral agreements (about 100).

**Table 1. International students at the Jagiellonian University – statistics.**

Total number of students at the Jagiellonian University (as of 28.05.2020)	34119
Total number of PhD students	2372
Total number of postgraduate students	2189
Total number of foreign students (all levels of studies)	4062
Ukraine	1339
Norway	409
Belarus	236
United States	191
Germany	190
Spain	156
Italy	118
France	115
China	95
Turkey	89

Source: USOSweb of Jagiellonian University, access: 28.05.2020

Conducting the study during the pandemic was challenging, as recruitment and field work had to be all done online, which had both drawbacks and advantages. On one hand the online format allowed us to reach students regardless of their physical location, and negated the risk of infection for both participants and researchers. The number of participants for the focus groups was lowered to 3-5 to allow the possibility for full participation and effective moderation. The timeframe of the focus groups and individual interviews was critical, as at the beginning of the lockdown the recruitment was not problematic – students were eager to share their new emotions and grievances. With the passage of time, however, students got tired with the online format and were less available, also possibly due to the cumulation of online tasks and meetings. This was also significant for the data itself – the interviews conducted at the start of the lockdown were of a different dynamic to those conducted even a month later. In relation to recruitment, we faced issues in finding students from Eastern Europe, who constitute an important share of full-time stationary international students at the university as well as those who study medicine in the English-language track. The former may not identify with the tag ‘international students’, which might hinder their participation, as well as unfamiliarity or unwillingness to discuss in an open group forum. To remedy this, we conducted individual interviews with this category of students.

## 4. Main Findings and Recommendations

### Organisational challenges

Difficulties linked to diverse administrative arrangements dominated the first period of the lockdown. The decision to stay in Krakow or return to one's home country (or other country of residence/destination) was a key concern in the first weeks of March 2020 and highlighted the lack of clear communication channels of both university and public service systems, in particular in English. Challenges were also felt in relation to external funding (scholarship, loan) mechanisms, national restrictions and border and visa issues, particularly by non-EU respondents. Students' decision-making in the first period of emergency was thus done in the context of uncertainty and unclear information, which heightened stress and anxiety and brought to light the sometimes precarious legal and financial situations of international students.

### Access to information

Students stressed the need for more prompt, filtered and streamlined information in English in relation to public services: visa/residency issues, healthcare assistance, border closures, etc. Not being sure whom to call in an emergency was an important factor in the feeling of security. A sense of confusion was also felt regarding information about university services, including course registration, schedule updates, students' rights. Language barriers became considerable burdens particularly in dealing with health and legal issues.

It is important to underline that **our respondents acknowledged and commended the efforts made by university support systems as well as staff to support them and provide regular updates regarding the pandemic situation.** We also noted the support and care that was provided to students through the expert interviews conducted with the International Student Office and particular international programme coordinators. The following quote is telling of the efforts beyond the 'call of duty' made:

*First and foremost, we were concerned with the safety of our students, both those who went away on an exchange, and those who came here. Therefore, this flow of information was direct, quick. (...) However, we also were completely overwhelmed. It was practically unlimited work hours, because we were working around the clock in those intense moments, the most difficult when, for example, we needed to collect information on where our students were, if they are safe, if they need support, help. We were calling them directly, as I mentioned. That took a lot of time, and those calls were many. Of course, then we had questions coming from different channels, for example from academic teachers. It was a difficult time. (employee at the International Student's Office)*

However, **top-down channels of information through university structures were often-times not conclusive, informative or relevant.** In fact, those working at the programme levels at the university were amongst those to condemn the ineffective lines of communication present within the organisational structure, particularly the lack of information in English at this critical time.

*The situation changed by the hour, so we needed to collect information every couple of days and then we would send them [to students], so that they had the feeling that someone is informing them in English. Because this is something that we noticed, something that for me was shameful, in terms of the reaction of the university, and I'm not afraid to say this, that there was no communication in the English language. Many announcements were sent through, but only in Polish. Ok, it is a Polish university, and the majority of students are Polish, but... (international programme coordinator)*

The students' responses highlight **the haphazard system of communication** that trickled down to them at the end of the day:

*Of course, I received a lot of very useful information from the University, but a lot of times I also received irrelevant information [...] I remember myself spending most of my productive time, especially the mornings, reading all this different news and trying to make, to find some sense in this chaotic situation. (man, EU, back home)*

We can conclude from the above quotes that although direct contact and actions of support for international students were done to their fullest capacity and went above and beyond the call of duty, particularly those who were under the 'care' of programme coordinators and structured exchange programmes, these agents were in a way compensating for the lack of systematized, top-down flows of communication, not only to students, but through the university structures and to the smallest units of organisation at the university.

Furthermore, **bureaucratic hurdles associated with legal status in the host country proved, unsurprisingly, to be most taxing for non-EU international students.** Even though Poland, like other countries, adopted a policy of leniency regarding visa and temporary residence permits in the face of border closures and public office backlogs, anxiety over sorting out residence status and feelings of abandonment by home countries – linked to the inability to return home – was underlined by our non-EU respondents and supported in another research (ESN 2020). The need for more targeted legal aid was underscored by non-EU students in relation to visa issues, permits of stay and other matters concerning their legal status. The lack of certainty and clear information in this regard left non-EU students feeling the precariousness of their status and rights, particularly those who were engaged in intensive onward-mobility programmes and had only short-term stays at each partner university. Also, those who travelled with their families faced administrative difficulties and unintended separation from their families for extensive periods of time proved to be extremely taxing, as in case of a student unable to return to the non-EU country where his family was:

*The pandemic started for me from 15th March. Since then, I think my life has been almost upside down. [...] Then, everything including the visa, just became a big question mark. [...] I was living here with my family – my wife and child – and this is the story... It started from September if I also include them, because as a mobility student, as a part of this mobility program of Europe [Erasmus Mundus] we had a big issue to deal with. I am a student and I have not much problem to travel to Poland and study here for up to 365 days under the*

*rules of Directive 2016/801.<sup>1</sup> But that directive doesn't provide any support to my family as a Master's degree student. [...] Right now, my priority is if there is any little plane which will fly back home, I want to go home to the place where my family is right now or bring them here.* (man, non-EU, Kraków)

While the pandemic situation took the entire world by surprise, and difficult individual stories abound, the often piecemeal or inconclusive information given by national and university authorities left students in limbo, sometimes causing them to miss narrow windows of opportunities to act. It also highlighted the lack of European-level coordination on mobility issues of both EU and third-country nationals residing in the EU. If during normal times, international students rely on their peers for support, during the pandemic it became impossible, since many international students did not have time to forge new friendships. This is when strong institutional anchoring becomes particularly important.

*Being an international student of course, involves more difficulties [even] in a normal period. If you have any difficulty and in issue, you could ask the other international students for instance. In these situations, is not possible. Some of us arrived in February and then the second week of March lockdown started. So basically, it was not even possible to create those relationships that you might need in a difficult period. So of course, when there are no relationships, it is important from the University to make available another person, a reference person, who will help with all the issues that you may face.* (man, EU, in Krakow)

**Access to information about healthcare was another important challenge that international students faced.** Lack of knowledge of the language and lack of access to reliable information about health services, testing, quarantine, amongst other things, amplified the feeling of insecurity:

*Access to information is actually the main point of the well-being (...) Because I think, in these times, you are always worried about what if I get sick and what will happen to me, can I go back to my country? Or would I be taken care of by this state or by my university? Or I mean, is there someone to reach out if I'm sick. That's I think the main point.* (woman, non-EU, in Krakow)

*It's really important to have someone to help you with different health issues. It's important to have someone to help you with the information, or help you to arrange something, because even though I'm alright with Polish, that was something I didn't want to deal with myself quite honestly. If I need to go to the doctor, honestly, I would prefer an English-speaking doctor.* (woman, non-EU, in Krakow)

*I had to find a doctor, an English doctor, which is really, really difficult if you don't want to pay three hundred złoty [PLN] just to see a doctor.* (man, EU, back home)

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<sup>1</sup> This is a reference to Directive (EU) 2016/801 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of research, studies, training, voluntary service, pupil exchange schemes or educational projects and au pairing.

*I was lucky that my program [from the home university] had given us a package of information about where to go and where the English-speaking doctors and hospitals were, but I didn't receive any information from the [Jagiellonian] University. (...) I think the only reason I knew a little bit about living in Krakow, was because my program specifically sent out a package of information for international students about living in Poland for the first time, and what to expect when you go to a doctor or to the grocery store or wherever. (woman, non-EU, back home)*

## **Travel uncertainty**

Travel uncertainties associated with border closures and restrictions were a big challenge for students who had to make the decision either to stay in Poland or go back home. While reasons behind such decisions varied, many students underlined the need for clearer communication on behalf of the university in this regard, particularly the decision to suspend classes or not for the duration of the semester. On the other hand, the course managers we interviewed stressed that they were not able to adequately respond to student inquiries due to the unpredictable nature of the situation, and ultimately the final decision had to be taken by the student:

*I felt like we weren't receiving much information from our coordinators. [...] I was never sure when and if the university was opening again. The only thing they told us was that we don't have to worry, because any decision we take won't affect our semester, so that was the information, but we were left completely free to this side to stay or to go, so I didn't really know what to do. (woman, EU, back home)*

*I would say, the information is very important, because for example, I don't speak Polish and I was missing very important information. So, yeah, I don't know, just send us as much information as possible and as complete as possible. Because in my case, I missed a very important piece of information that caused me a little problem. (woman, EU, back home)*

At the same time, **some students underlined that they did not have a choice between leaving or staying**. For some there was **no available repatriation flights to their home countries** – this was relevant both for EU and non-EU students, with the latter facing more obstacles to returning home. Others were afraid that they would not be able to come back and continue their studies after leaving the Schengen Area. The complexity of the situation is shown in the below quote, highlighting the obstacles faced by students coming from non-EU countries:

*Right now, my priority is, if there is any plane which will fly back to home, I want to go home to the place where my family is right now (...). So, I just want to go home, and I have been waiting for any chance, but there are not any flights. The embassies are trying to provide some charter flights, but the number of them are really small, like, there are thousands of people (from my home country) currently in Europe and it's not easy to carry them back with just two flights per month. (man, non-EU, in Krakow)*

*If I leave the Schengen area now, there is a high chance that I'm not going back to the Schengen area [because] it's not yet sure whether I'm going to get a visa. (woman, non-EU, in Krakow)*

## Financial insecurity

Financial instability during the pandemic was another pressing issue for several interviewed international students. **Students noted stress connected with scholarship delays and uncertainty about the continuation of grants; a few lost part-time jobs as a result of the pandemic.** Initially, uncertainty about the continuation of scholarships was a problem for students who were receiving funding from the European Union as well. Even though this uncertainty was soon resolved, and students were able to maintain their scholarships, some of them underlined the stress they experienced due to the lack of reliable information. Some of international students experienced delays in the payment of the scholarships, particularly those who were funding their studies from external sources and/or via bilateral agreements between the host university in Poland and the university abroad:

*I had taken out the student loan money for living expenses and my tuition and [when scholarship payments were denied/delayed] it was incredibly stressful. I felt that I wasn't getting much help from the office here that's designated to work on student loans, I felt like I had to fight like hell to put it very kind of plainly. So, I would say the first month of everything happening was incredibly stressful for me financially and I didn't feel as if I was being supported as a student. (woman, non-EU, in Krakow)*

*It was so complicated to get the scholarship for this second semester. (...) I had to send all of my new papers [to the home university] that I got for the first semester and everything, but because of the virus it happens so late, I had to rely on my own finances before having the scholarship and it was also delayed. So, it was really, really late and my father helped me to pay for the apartment in Poland during that time. So, if I didn't have support from my family, I would have just lost my apartment. (man, EU, back home)*

Some programme management offices at the Jagiellonian University proved to be very helpful for international students who experienced financial problems. Pushing deadlines for tuition payment and providing reliable information on legislative and administrative requirements was particularly appreciated:

*So, the university was welcoming and nice enough to push back the tuition due date, because the money I was supposed to receive in order to pay for tuition was suddenly non-existent. So, they were really nice about that, they stayed in constant contact with me and the other American student I was unfamiliar with, they gave us updates about this piece of legislation might have something about the money, kept us updated. (woman, non-EU, in Krakow)*

To summarise, during the pandemic lockdown international students experienced various organisational problems of different degrees and severity. In times of uncertainty, precariousness of their status and the lack of social connections jeopardized many international students' sense of wellness and security: "they have to understand that it's different being international during a pandemic, than being in your city. So maybe, they have to adjust a bit more to our demands" (woman, EU, back home). The presented case study underlines the importance of

strong institutional anchoring and support from the university structures in mitigating the negative impact of the pandemic and associated lockdown on students' status and rights, feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. That is why it is crucial for universities to develop reliable information systems and contingency measures to minimize the risks and disadvantages that international students face in accessing information and assuring their status. This includes flexibility and accommodation measures catered to students' needs and access to clear, up-to-date information on regulations, legal requirements, and possibilities of support.

### **Organisational Dimension: Key Recommendations**

1. Clear and prompt access to information through one-stop-shop: A centralised and dedicated news feed/webpage with up-to-date, streamlined and clear information with appropriate links, emergency contacts, information about public services and university services (including mental-health support) which is accessible in Polish and English.
  - Direct source of information and contacts in case of emergencies (a list of phone numbers, English-speaking medical services) as well as an email address/forum for diverse concerns.
  - Clear guidelines for students in case of infection, as well as more general information on the functioning of the health care system and other public services.
  - FAQ section/feed in relation to crisis situations, both in Polish and English.
2. Provide more targeted legal aid (a centre/person responsible for this), particularly to non-EU students in relation to visa issues, permits of stay and other matters concerning their legal status. More training/support to administrative staff who deal with this on a programme/department level.
3. Ensure that international students can register for classes fully online, with access to comprehensive, streamlined information, without needing to navigate different internal departmental regulations and administrative personnel.
4. Monitor scholarship regulations and payments and ensure a flexible system of extending the deadlines for student fees (noted as a good practice). Make information on Crisis Funds more accessible to international students.
5. Develop a more comprehensive system of communication within university structures to share and transfer up to date information to faculties, departments and programmes which deal with international students.

## Education online: methods, approach, assessment

The importance and intensity of learning through international student experiences is well known, although it takes place predominantly outside of the classroom and in face-to-face encounters (Cairns et al 2018). Forging new social networks, experiencing independent living outside of the parental home, intercultural awareness and reflexive self-positioning are amongst the key competencies developed in educational stays abroad (among others, Krzaklewska 2013; Beech 2019; Czerska-Shaw & Krzaklewska 2021). When the global pandemic and ensuing lockdown hit in March 2020, students' learning experiences became almost totally confined to the digital space. This digital social space soon became saturated with online classroom schedules and time spent learning to manoeuvre new platforms and new forms of learning, alongside efforts to build and maintain private social networks. What was only a few weeks prior a space for predominately private interactions and social networks, now became the space of both educational and social spaces, both public and private, often overlapping and intimately so.

The saturation of the digital space – or the sudden infiltration of the private digital space by the public educational one – had a number of important consequences on teaching and learning outcomes. In our study our respondents highlighted both the positive and negative side-effects of this sudden shift, which may have lasting effects on teaching and learning practices and expectations.

### Opportunities

In the first place it must be highlighted that the almost-immediate **switch from face-to-face to online education was evaluated positively** by students, as it provided them with structured learning, assured their student status and routinised their days, which was particularly important in the first weeks of the lockdown period. The platforms were introduced swiftly, without much disruption between face to face and online schedules. Scheduling the digital space may have provided a sense of security and stability in an otherwise physically and ontologically insecure situation. It was also a moment of intense learning curves, particularly in honing digital skills, which may have given students the space and initial enthusiasm to fill up their time with novel forms of learning.

*I started to learn French because I can speak Japanese and English. [...] I learned Polish and from March I'm starting to learn French, so, every day I started with two hours of French and one hour of Polish. [...] I think it's a good time for learning some new skills.*  
(man, non-EU, in Krakow)

Further, a more **direct and personal approach of some instructors was also appreciated** by students, particularly at the start of the lockdown, as it personalised the learning environment and motivated them to participate in classes and ease their way into online education. This aspect of the learning experience helped, in the eyes of our respondents, to break down the barriers to communication with their academic teachers. The latter became more approachable, the learning environment more relaxed and ultimately less hierarchical. In the Polish educa-

tional context, this may have far-reaching effects on teacher-student relations and rigid social structures which underpin them. A window onto the private sphere – and more so, the intimate space of home life – of both students and teachers may not be easily undone.

The prolonged online learning during the second wave of the pandemic in the autumn of 2020 may indeed lead to deeper behavioural changes and expectations that these new relational structures persist beyond the scope of the present pandemic. It is important to note here, however, that these expectations also vary depending on the prior education and cultural background of international students – those used to more hierarchical student-teacher relations (particularly noted by some of our respondents from Ukraine, Belarus, China) may also have had a harder time in ‘entering’ the private space of these encounters, resulting in more passive forms of online classroom behaviours (i.e. unwillingness to turn on one’s camera or use the microphone).

## Challenges

While there may have been some initial enthusiasm for new and more learning opportunities online, this was mostly an attempt to fill in the extra time that was not being spent on socialising with new friends, travelling, and exploring the city. The **lack of regular, face to face social contact was unsurprisingly very difficult for students**: students missed this very important social learning experience ‘in reality’. Confinement in lockdown quickly resulted in the feeling of monotony (in front of a screen all day), social isolation, also sometimes from family and dependents back at home, difficulties in concentration and ultimately a **lack of motivation** to study.

*I have so many deadlines which I have to meet, even though I am already late for most of them, and I have asked for extensions and the professors, [...] they have been very supportive, but still this emotional crack doesn't really let me focus on anything. Every day I just open the computer and just blankness. I just want to write down something, I have so many thoughts, interestingly I have so many thoughts before sleeping and then I just wake up at that moment and then start to open my computer. I want to bring them down to the world, but then as soon as I open the documents or something and then it's gone again, and my sleep is gone and my thoughts are gone. [...] so mostly I try to not to open the computer but write down my ideas on my iPad sometimes, because as soon as I sit here like this in front of the computer, I have some pressure on me - what are you doing, this kind of question, like do you really think it's a good idea? (man, non-EU, in Krakow)*

Just like the initial enthusiasm to engage in diverse learning activities on the side of students, the switch to online learning was often accompanied by an overload of extra reading / study materials and platforms to compensate for the lack of regular classes from the side of academic teachers. This resulted in **course material and technological overload**. This did not help to increase student output, but rather added to stress and a decrease in motivation to study. As the teaching methods were often not suited to online learning, passive lectures would lead to passive learning. Students also noted the difficulty in keeping up with a multitude of teach-

ing and learning platforms which all take time to learn and, if overloaded, create a cacophony in communication flows.

*Well, I would say, that the negative, I think, it's like a common thought that being always on the computer. At a certain point, you lose your attention, so it's like it's really difficult for me to keep up with what they say at the certain point, I just start staring at my window or at the wall. (...) And also, the fact, that you can record what they are saying makes you more like okay I will do that when I will need it so it there's no need to do that. During my presentations on remote, it's like tough, because I think, it's better like to have the interaction and to see what people really think about your things. I would say, okay there will be 20 people connected on MS Teams while I'm speaking, but who is actually following me? So, it's more challenging in this sense, but I think that I mean it's almost the end of the semester so it's been quite good in in general, we reached what we needed to study during this month, so yeah. (woman, EU, outside Krakow)*

Further, **feelings of uncertainty**, which ultimately led to stress and anxiety, were highlighted in relation to educational matters: some students noted the lack of clarity regarding guidelines for exams and assessment, how to drop classes, how to successfully finish the semester, how to deal with technical difficulties during classes.

Finally, the breakdown in boundaries between the private and public (educational) spheres may have highlighted **inequalities amongst students** and in front of their academic teachers. Students found themselves in a variety of difficult learning environments: some were isolated in dormitories, others faced difficult situations in their parental homes, yet others noted difficulties with accessing technological tools, maintaining steady internet connections and gaining access to study materials, library archives, or empirical data/fieldwork. While international student mobility is often seen as a privilege, the pandemic may have revealed the uneven distribution of this status. What became evident during our data collection is that the term 'international student' has a certain (positive, privileged, but also temporal) connotation, and some students missed the opportunity to take part in the focus groups because they did not identify with this category. This is particularly the case of students enrolled in a full programme of studies taught in Polish. While this may indicate a high level of integration with Polish students, it may also mask particular challenges that this group of students may face.

## Recommendations

### For university structures/ departmental heads / programme managers:

1. Develop a **comprehensive framework for online learning**, including harmonizing online platforms to reduce the number of channels of communication, agreed upon by programme managers, teachers and students.
2. **Strengthen general digital literacy of students**, e.g. provide training for students on the most common online platforms used in an institution, netiquette & online communication.
3. **Support vulnerable students** and take note of individual students' needs
  - some may be care-givers back at home, have no or limited access to computer and internet, etc.
4. Provide students in need with adequate access to technological tools and equipment, including laptops, working spaces, internet connection.

### For academic teachers:

1. Promote **innovative and engaging methodologies of online education**, also through teacher training:
  - Mix and match teaching methodologies within one course as well as study programme. A mixture of educational forms was preferred, learning based on reading or lectures should be matched with more interactive methods and group project work.
  - Include both synchronous and asynchronous teaching formats with an emphasis on the first: the first takes into account the need to engage with students and create modes of group interaction and active-learning spaces online, whilst the second acknowledges technological limitations, differing time zones, and inadequate learning environments.
  - Provide individualised consultations and feedback to students in courses/programmes of study. Allow for forums for concerns, questions, and social/peer engagement and learning.
2. Provide **clear course requirements** (within the syllabus) and assessment criteria adapted to online education.
3. Enable **channels for student-teacher-peer communication**:
  - Establish and maintain regular 'online office hours' where students may make an appointment to have direct online communication with teachers - remind students of this possibility regularly.
  - Establish ways to give feedback during the class, positive feedback in particular to strengthen motivation.
  - Provide an empathetic space to share stories and ask questions at start / end of the class.

## Psychological/social well-being: support in isolation, intervention

Psychological well-being was a critical issue for international students during the lockdown, although this is a growing concern in relation to the overall young generation during pandemic (Mastrotheodoros 2020) but also beyond the period of lockdown (Pitchforth et al. 2019; Yeung, Weale & Perraudin 2016). With the outburst of the pandemic, students faced fear and anxieties in relation to the epidemiological situation, their health and the health of their families – a common global experience particularly in the first phase of the pandemic. Also, the transition to online education has been a general student experience. But in the case of international students, additional factors came into play, particularly those that were discussed already in previous parts of this report: feelings of insecurity in a foreign country, organizational matters, including access to information and financial stability. Dealing with the pandemic in a foreign environment, without knowing the local language, cultural codes, ways in which the system (particularly health system) works might be particularly difficult. Importantly, social isolation resulting from the closure of universities had particular consequences for this group, as they lacked other local social support networks.

The **loss of control over one's life** was for many a frustrating experience, e.g. being stuck in Poland when a person wanted to go home to their family, as described in a quote below. Or conversely, being at home when a person actually wanted to remain in Poland. As other studies show, the anxiety was not mechanically removed upon return to the family home (cf. ESN 2020). Some students remarked that their return home was a source of anxiety and emotional challenge:

*For me, I think **the biggest challenge of being stuck at home**, is that I'm not used anymore to live with my family. I mean, I live in a family of four and the house is not that big and when I'm abroad and really used to living in my own space, to have my own independence (...). Because when I'm abroad, I also have my own routine in terms of studying for example, so, I get up and I go to a library, I try to be as early as possible, to take a seat, because often they are crowded especially in exam periods. So, I have a much more fixed routine while here I feel a bit living in a bubble, living in a kind of parallel universe. (...) So, in [country] we can literally go out only for the grocery, so this is very overwhelming after a while. I think this is the biggest challenge for me.*  
(woman, EU, back home)

This confinement experience – the feeling of “being stuck” as described by students – was not only linked to the inability to go to the university, party or meet friends, but also in relation to international mobility, as many students planned international trips (including study periods) around Europe that were cancelled. **The collapse of their mobility plans was an additional factor adding to the frustration and feeling of loss**, severely impacting on their educational outcomes:

*(...) Frustrating situation. Because the main reason I chose this [...] mobility program, you get to stay in at least three countries, three cities and this is my first time in Europe. I've been in Asia, in different countries in Asia, but I've never been out of Asia, so I had*

*this hope of like okay, I'll get to see a new culture with the studies. Of course, that's not happening anymore. So that was the first frustration that I couldn't go out as I want. And the second thing is like, I was kind of scared and frightened all the time, (...) my country is not very responsible about its citizen at [this] time. So, [...] when they closed the borders, I knew that I can't go home. Even now I can't go home. Because flights are not operating. So, feeling that I don't know when I get to see my family members, my mom and dad, that's kind of scary. So this kind of hampered my study at the same time.* (woman, non-EU, in Krakow)

*I felt depressed when I came back [home], because I thought that I lost my opportunity to improve my English, because to me, my situation was a very important opportunity to study abroad, and I feel that this is the worst time for doing Erasmus. [at my home university] they said I lost a semester, so, I have to say, I fell behind with some exams and I must re-take some of them. They [the university] couldn't permit me to do an Erasmus again next year, because I have to recuperate some exams.* (woman, EU, back home)

We may say that this **difficult pandemic situation in a way legitimized the discussion around mental well-being, lifting this topic out of the realm of tabu.** The feeling that "it's ok not to feel ok" became more commonplace. In fact, students during the focus groups talked openly about their feelings of frustration, isolation, depression, anxiety, stress, as well as underlying mental health conditions, not only in individual interviews but also during the focus groups. At the same time, study participants talked about factors that relieved their stress and actions they undertook to improve their wellbeing, including seeking professional psychological support. This awareness of the importance of psychological issues was mentioned many times, with students raising the issue of social campaigns in relation to mental health.

*The biggest challenge for me was to find any balance and stay focused, because I had to actually fulfil academic [...], I had to fulfil assignments, I had to keep up with my readings. Especially in the beginning it was stressful, actually so stressful, because in the first two weeks we were getting such various news on the situation, and contradicting, and I had also to keep up with my university and also find the truth in this situation, which was really, really difficult.* (man, EU, back home)

*I'm still a bit stressed and you don't know what the future will be made of.* (woman, EU, in Krakow)

*In this time, I found myself calling up psychologists and also suggest people to do that. If they can. That is something that many people don't do for different reasons, but I think, it should be done sometimes.* (woman, EU, in Krakow)

**The Jagiellonian University houses the Student Centre for Support and Adaptation (SOWA)** which offers crisis intervention in cases of psychological crisis, support in the adaptation process, mental health promotion and education, as well as information on how and where to seek psychiatric care or psychotherapy. SOWA is focused on short-term help in a crisis, but students may also schedule consultations with the psychologists on a more regular basis. During the pandemic, the contact with SOWA has taken place mostly via phone or

MS Teams. The Centre also caters to international students, and it seems that this group constitutes an increasing clientele for the centre. In the expert interviews the employees of SOWA confirmed that during the pandemic the interventions directed at international students have intensified and e.g. among 200 interventions in June, about 20% were directed at this group (whereas international students constitute about 12% of the total student population).

The employees of SOWA underlined that the fact of being an international student is already a particular situation that may bring additional stress and anxiety, and that difficulties linked to adaptation may stir up already existing conditions. The workers pointed out that **students were mostly coping with forced isolation in relation to lockdown** introduced in March:

*Most students came to Krakow for the second semester (as Erasmus) and lockdown started somewhere in mid-March, so they did not have a chance to build relations with peers, as they maybe had two meetings at the university. So the isolation and lack of social contacts were the biggest issues. They could only use chatting, messenger, or meetings on Teams. And this resulted in fear, loneliness, bad moods. But also not tolerating uncertainty, how long this situation would last, would this change. (...) Plus there was much worrying for the families. (...) Another matter was the adaptation to a new way of learning.*  
(employee of SOWA)

A very important differentiation was made by employees of SOWA between students coping with adaptation issues (with or without the pandemic) in comparison to those who arrive to Poland with pre-existing health conditions. In the latter group, the difficult adaptation process may intensify pre-existing illnesses as well as difficulties in accessing the health system due to a lack of knowledge of the Polish language or organisational principles (e.g. related to insurance).

Our study reveals that the **majority of students were aware of the functioning of the SOWA student support Centre**. Students confirmed receiving information via email of possibilities to seek psychological support and generally were very positive about its existence:

*Yes, I've heard of it I think it's called so SOWA, if I'm not mistaken. I'm familiar with it, I have not used it personally and I don't know if my colleagues have or not, but I think the knowledge may be that there is something that's still accessible to people, I do believe they're still offering online support as well to students and I think that's very helpful of course, if folks are uncomfortable getting outside services like in Krakow that is not related to the University, I think that's very vital for students to have, because of course Covid-19 is not only affecting physical health it's of course affecting mental health and in some ways self-isolation can be very damaging for someone's mental health. So, I think it's wonderful that those services are offered.* (woman, non-EU, in Krakow)

*At the same time, among those who know about SOWA many felt that it was only for serious, emergency situations rather than lower-intensity issues of anxiety, depression and social isolation. They may have encountered language or cultural barriers in*

*accessing this service. And for the psychological, the helpline SOWA is very helpful, but I feel like it's more oriented to emergencies, like to emergency situations. So, my suggestion, maybe, it's just too much, just too idealistic, but it would be nice to have a group session, for example, all the people from our master have a psychological group session where everybody can tell how he feels. Something that can be organized by our coordinators or something like that, like in a group, because, yeah... That would have been very nice. (woman, EU, in Krakow)*

Additionally, some of our respondents recommended that such a **centre could offer students guidelines on how to deal with pandemic-related stress and anxieties**, e.g. podcasts or videos giving some targeted advice in English. This suggests that in the case of mental health, not only is intervention work of critical importance, but preventative activities would be welcomed by students increasingly aware of the importance of mental wellbeing.

## **Recommendations**

1. Provide clear information (in English and other common languages) on psychological support services at the university and develop a more comprehensive support system tailored to international students.
2. Raise awareness and break taboos of mental health through campaigns, FAQ pages, guidelines, advice on how to deal with crisis situations etc.
3. Encourage students to discuss their experiences and concerns with mental health professionals, within their programme framework but also within peer groups and more informal settings.

## 5. Conclusions

Through focus groups and in-depth individual interviews conducted between March-May 2020, we collected a series of revealing narratives from students whose international mobility was interrupted and curtailed by the sudden introduction of the lockdown resulting from COVID pandemic. Together with the voices of institutional university actors trying to deal with this unprecedented crisis situation, their accounts serve to propose a list of recommendations to create support structures in case the situation repeats itself. International students experienced varying degrees of upheaval in educational and well as organisational spheres, which have had a tangible effect on their mental health and well-being. This context created an ill-suited environment for effective learning experiences, particularly in the switch to online platforms and confinement to the immediate private space of 'home'.

Nevertheless, we note that this prolonged moment of isolation and crisis revealed new forms of micro-level coping strategies on the side of students (e.g. time management techniques, self-development goals) and a measure of structural adjustments on the side of university authorities (e.g. new modes of communication, discussion of online learning techniques, awareness of mental-health issues). Yet this period has also revealed significant gaps in institutional support frameworks, inefficacy of information channels, disparities in teaching and learning styles and their effectiveness, as well as the still underdeveloped awareness and support of mental well-being.

Our recommendations to university authorities are based on the discussions with and needs of the international students we studied, as well as those dealing with this student population at different levels of university teaching and administration. We stress the diversity of needs that should be taken into account when devising strategies for supporting international students, based on the length of stay, region of origin, as well as particularly of the course of studies. While efforts on behalf of university support structures and academic teachers cannot, and should not, be downplayed during this very difficult period, it is important to note the often ad-hoc and piecemeal measures taken now need to become systematised and strategized in preparation for the future.

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## **SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CRISIS SITUATIONS – POLICY BRIEF**

**Recommendations for university institutions on the basis of the study  
“Im/mobility in times of COVID-19 – the situation of international students”**

### **Most important recommendations:**

- **URGENT: ‘one-stop-shop’:** a centralized, online information access point for international students with up to date information, translated documents and links to essential services, particularly how to proceed in case of infection or contact with infected persons.
- **Teacher training:** a comprehensive system of teacher training to suit blended/online formats, with an emphasis on student-centered, active learning.
- **Mental-health awareness campaign** and developed support structures to accompany international students.

### **The most important challenges international students faced:**

- **Precariousness of mobility status:** difficulties, particularly for non-EU students in accessing information about regularising their stay, lack of streamlined information about border closures, difficulties with acknowledging financial grants & scholarships, dealing with administrative hurdles.
- **Limited / dispersed access to information** about public services, particularly health care.
- **Overload of course materials** without appropriate online didactic methods.
- **Low levels of concentration, motivation, high anxiety, undeveloped / halted social networks.**

### **The good practices that were highlighted by students:**

- **Approachability and support of administrative staff and academic teachers**, including consultations, empathy, responsiveness to emails, telephones.
- **Prompt switch to online technological tools**, including teaching and learning platforms.

### **About the study**

The recommendations are based on a qualitative study, “International Student (Im)mobility in Times of COVID-19”. Five focus groups and 7 individual in-depth interviews were conducted online between March and May 2020 with 29 international students at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow in diverse types of programmes – full-time stationary BA and MA programmes, Erasmus+ exchanges, and double or joint degree consortium programmes such as Erasmus Mundus Joint Master’s Degrees. The sample consisted of 18 women and 11 men, from diverse faculties, both from EU and non-EU countries. 15 participants continued living or remained in Poland upon lockdown, while 14 went back to their home countries or other localities. Additionally, four expert interviews took place with those who manage programmes for international students at programme and university levels, and those who run the university centre for psychological support.

## Detailed results and recommendations

### Introduction

Below, we highlight possible ways of supporting international students during crisis situations in three spheres: **organisational, educational, and socio-psychological well-being**. While students rated the university positively during the crisis, there were important challenges which go beyond this unique situation that point to weaknesses of institutional solutions. While in some respects international students have shared the experience of lockdown with local students, their mobility status brings different challenges, mostly due to lack of local language knowledge and access to information, the weakness of social safety nets, as well as their legal status as foreigners.

The full report of the study will be available in November 2020.

### Organisational aspects: legal status, access to information, travel restrictions

#### Challenges

- **Access to information:** Students stressed the need for more prompt, filtered and streamlined information in English in relation to public services: visa/residency issues, healthcare assistance, border closures, etc. Uncertainty regarding who to contact in an emergency was an important factor in the feeling of insecurity. This was compounded by confusion over information about university services, including course registration, schedule updates, students' rights. Language barriers were strongly felt.
- **Travel uncertainty:** The difficult decision to stay in Krakow or return home was key at the start of the pandemic, a situation aggravated by ad hoc or delayed decisions made by universities. Students who were unable to travel home, mostly from non-EU countries, felt confined, some in effect being deprived of contact with their families and in some cases children.
- **Financial instability:** Students noted stress connected with scholarship delays and uncertainty about the continuation of grants. Some students lost part-time jobs during the pandemic. Access to information about financial support was not always available and not centralised.

#### Recommendations

1. Clear and **prompt access to information through a one-stop-shop**: A centralised and dedicated news feed/webpage with up-to-date, streamlined and clear information with appropriate links, emergency contacts, information about public services and university services (including mental-health support) which is accessible in Polish and English.
  - Direct source of information and contacts in case of emergencies (a list of phone numbers, English-speaking medical services) as well as an email address/forum for diverse concerns.
  - Clear guidelines for students in case of infection, as well as more general information on the functioning of the health care system and other public services.
  - FAQ section/feed in relation to crisis situations, both in Polish and English.
2. Provide **more targeted legal aid** (a centre/person responsible for this), particularly to non-EU students in relation to visa issues, permits of stay and other matters concerning their legal status. More training/support to administrative staff who deal with this on a programme/departments level.
3. A dedicated, standardised system for international students to **register for classes fully online**, with access to comprehensive, streamlined information. This would be best handled as a centralised, unified system.
4. **Monitor scholarship regulations and payments** and ensure a flexible system of extending deadlines for student fees (noted as a good practice). Make accessible information on Crisis Funds available.
5. Develop a more comprehensive system of **communication within university structures** to share and transfer up to date information to faculties, departments and programmes which deal with international students.

## Education online: methods, approach, assessment

### *Evaluation of online education*

- The almost-immediate **switch from offline to online education was evaluated positively** by students, as it provided them with structured learning, reassured them of their student status, providing a sense of routine which was particularly important in the lockdown period.
- A more **direct and personal approach of some instructors was appreciated** by students, particularly at start of the lockdown, as it personalised the learning environment and motivated them to participate in classes and ease their way into online education.

### *Challenges*

- **Missing social relations:** The lack of regular, face to face social contact was unsurprisingly very difficult for students. Confinement in lockdown resulted in the feeling of monotony (in front of a screen all day), social isolation, difficulties in concentration and lack of motivation to study.
- **Inadequate learning environments:** Students found themselves in a variety of difficult environments, with some isolated in dormitories while others were in crowded parental homes. Difficulties with accessing technological tools, internet, study materials, library archives, difficulties in collecting empirical data/fieldwork were all mentioned. Others felt de-motivated by passive lectures.
- **Course material / technological overload:** the switch to online learning was often accompanied by an overload of extra reading / study materials to compensate for the lack of regular classes. However, this did not often increase student output, but rather added to stress and decrease in motivation to study. Students also noted the difficulty in keeping up with a multitude of teaching and learning platforms.
- **Feelings of uncertainty:** Students noted the lack of clarity regarding guidelines for exams and assessment.

### *Recommendations*

#### **For university structures/ departmental heads / programme managers:**

- Develop a **comprehensive framework for online learning**, focusing on the best online platforms, agreed upon by programme managers and/or teachers.
- **Strengthen the general digital literacy of students**, e.g. provide training for students on the most common online platforms used by an institution, netiquette & online communication.
- Support vulnerable students and take note of students' needs, whether pastoral or technical.
- Provide students in need with the requisite access to technological tools and equipment.

#### **For academic teachers:**

1. Introduce **innovative and engaging methodologies of online education**, also through teacher training:
  - Mix and match teaching methodologies within one course as well as study programme.
  - Balancing synchronous and asynchronous elements of online learning to provide a sense of community and flexibility.
  - Provide individualised consultations and feedback to students in courses/programmes of study. Allow for forums for concerns, questions, and social/peer engagement and learning.
2. Provide **clear course requirements** and assessment criteria adapted to online education.
3. Enable **channels for student-teacher-peer communication**:
  - Establish regular 'online office hours' where students may make an appointment to have direct communication with teachers.
  - Establish ways to give feedback during the class, positive feedback in particular to strengthen motivation
  - Provide an empathetic space to share stories and ask questions at the start of the class

## Psychological/social well-being: support in isolation, intervention

### Challenges

- **Psychological well-being** was a critical issue for international students during the lockdown, however this is a growing concern beyond the period of the pandemic. Feelings of isolation and lack of concentration, or even lack of social networks for many students was a very difficult experience. Additional financial and legal issues were an added burden which resulted in hardship/stress.
- **Accessing support:** While the majority of students were aware of the functioning of the SOWA student support centre, many felt that it was only for serious, emergency situations rather than lower-intensity issues of anxiety, depression and social isolation. They may have encountered language or cultural barriers in accessing this service.

### Recommendations

1. Provide **clear information (in English and other common languages)** on psychological support services at the university and develop a more comprehensive support system tailored to international students.
2. **Raise awareness and break taboos of mental health** through campaigns, FAQ pages, guidelines, advice on how to deal with crisis situations etc.
3. **Encourage students to discuss their experiences and concerns** with mental health professionals, within their programme framework but also within peer groups and more informal settings.

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