

Erasmus+ Mobility in times of pandemics

Experience of Georgian Universities



Research Group:

Tamar Lortkipanidze

Nino Urushadze



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

This project has been co-funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

National Erasmus + Office Georgia

2021

Introduction

Georgia is among the leading partner countries by the scale of Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility (ICM) and is ranked 6th among 141 partner countries participating in the programme. 39 higher education institutions from the capital and regional cities, out of 56 operating in the country, are involved in the ICM programme. Georgia has mobility partnerships with more than 250 universities from all programme countries.

Since 2016 National Erasmus+ Office (NEO) Georgia conducted 25 institutional visits (5 visits per year) in order to monitor ICM projects implementation. Problems related to the administration of the mobility process have been constantly reported during the monitoring visits. From 2020 the overall implementation of exchange programmes was blemished because of lockdowns and travel restrictions due to Covid-19 outbreak. New circumstances caused many difficulties worldwide, each student and each university faced new challenges, to which we had to respond and adjust. National Erasmus+ Office has considered that instead of making fragmental monitoring visits to several institutions it would be more useful to observe the whole picture of the Covid-19 pandemic impact on international cooperation and mobilities at Georgian HEIs. In 2020 NEO conducted a small internal survey to find out how pandemic has affected mobility projects at Georgian HEIs. But this time NEO aims at summarizing experience of three last semesters (2020-2021) and studying: a) The influence of the pandemic at the ICM on institutional and individual levels, b) The response of HEIs to these challenges, c) How the pandemic affected previously reported problems. With this aim NEO conducted a survey inviting local HEIs involved in Erasmus+ mobility programmes to take part and fill in the questionnaire. We were interested in how universities adjusted to the given circumstances, what approaches and steps were taken to meet the challenges caused by Covid-19 outbreak. The target audience of the survey were representatives of the international relations offices (IRO) at HEIs, the units that are responsible for ICM project implementation, cooperation with programme country universities, managing ICM calls and relevant procedures.

Methodology

As mentioned above, 39 Georgian HEIs have been involved in ICM programme between 2015-2021. At the moment of pandemic outbreak, only 28 HEIs have had active ICM projects, and 24 out of them have participated in the electronic survey, thus making 85.7%. The scope of the study covers public and private universities with different profiles and specifications (multi profile, medical schools, art schools, etc.), HEIs with high and relatively low number of ICM partnerships, universities from the capital and regions. 22 HEIs, participating in the survey, have been visited by the NEO team in previous years for ICM project monitoring.

For detailed figures of participant HEIs see Table 1.

Table 1.

	Higher Education Institution	City	Number of ICM projects 2015-2021	ICM monitoring conducted
1	Akaki Tsereteli State University	Kutaisi	35	Yes
2	Apolon Kutateladze Academy of Arts	Tbilisi	34	Yes
3	Batumi Navigation Teaching University	Batumi	1	Yes
4	Batumi State Maritime Academy	Batumi	8	Yes
5	Black Sea International University	Tbilisi	18	Yes
6	Business and Technology University	Tbilisi	18	No
7	Caucasus University	Tbilisi	117	Yes
8	Georgian Technical University	Tbilisi	75	Yes
9	GIPA	Tbilisi	27	Yes
10	Gori State Teaching University	Gori	7	Yes
11	Guram Tavartkiladze Teaching University	Tbilisi	3	Yes
12	Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University	Telavi	31	Yes
13	Ilia State University	Tbilisi	297	Yes
14	Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University	Tbilisi	349	Yes
15	Petre Shotadze Tbilisi Medical Academy	Tbilisi	12	Yes
16	Samtskhe-Javakheti State University	Akhaltsikhe	2	Yes

17	SEU National Teaching University	Tbilisi	2	No
18	Shota Meskhia State Teaching University	Zugdidi	3	Yes
19	Shota Rustaveli State University	Batumi	69	Yes
20	Sokhumi State University	Tbilisi	38	Yes
21	Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani Teaching University	Tbilisi	27	Yes
22	Tbilisi State Medical University	Tbilisi	35	Yes
23	Tbilisi Vano Sarajishvili State Conservatorie	Tbilisi	28	Yes
24	University of Georgia	Tbilisi	43	Yes

The survey was divided into three main parts: administrative process, statistics and problems of outgoing/incoming mobilities. The period of the study covers three semesters (spring and fall 2020 and spring 2021). Please take into consideration that some questions of the survey envisaged to have multiple answer format and 100% is not always a summarized number of received answers.

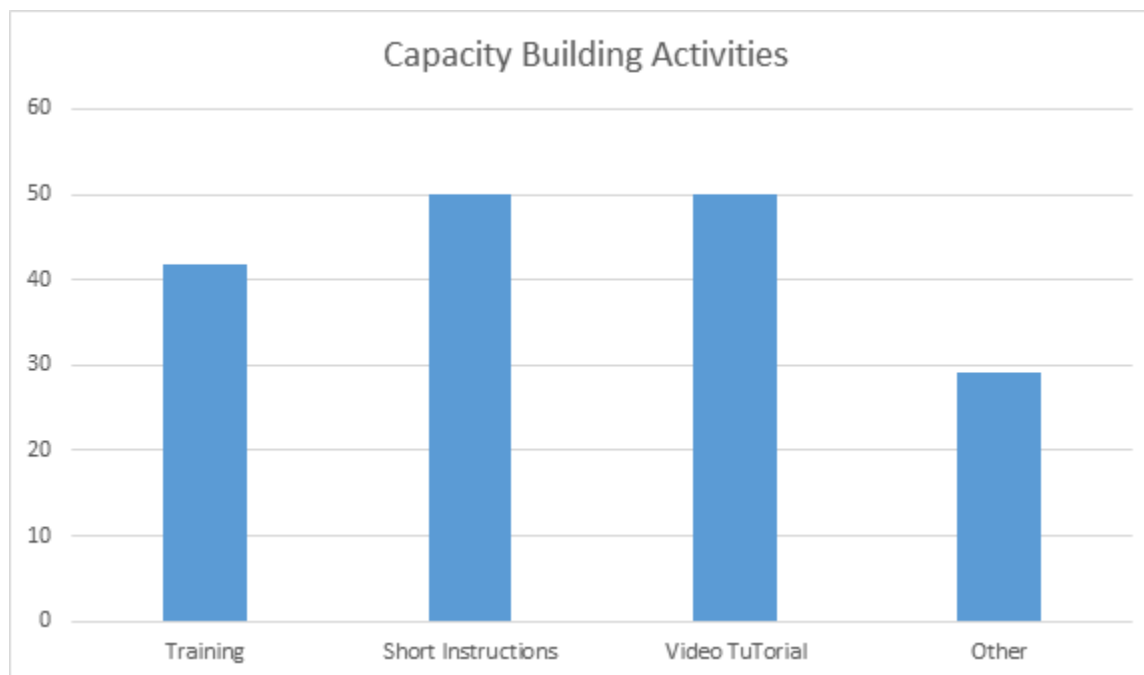
Main findings

Administrative process

Majority of HEIs (70.8%) stated that no changes have been made to the international exchange programme strategies at their institutions. Those who revised their approaches, mainly focused on online/blended learning components, virtual mobilities and concentrated on international projects that could be implemented via online tools. As stated by the participants “Mobility periods became more flexible, it was possible to implement virtual mobilities”.

With the aim to restrain the Covid-19 outbreak the teaching process all over the world, including Georgia, was switched to an online regime. As summarized in the statistical part below the overall approach in the beginning of 2020 was just postponing all envisaged mobilities for the 2021-22 academic year. But the students who were already visiting Georgia or those who expressed the willingness to use the mobility opportunity despite the pandemic, were offered distance learning activities. So, universities tried to prepare their staff for the new reality. Different capacity building activities such as trainings, video tutorials and short instructions were provided by the majority (62%) of HEIs for academic staff in order to support online teaching activities in English language.

Figure 1. Capacity building activities for university staff offer during pandemic



The new circumstances of course affected the IRO activities and routine. Virtual events and activities became an inseparable part of everyday life. 44% of HEIs confirmed that staff of international relations offices has been offered specific trainings.

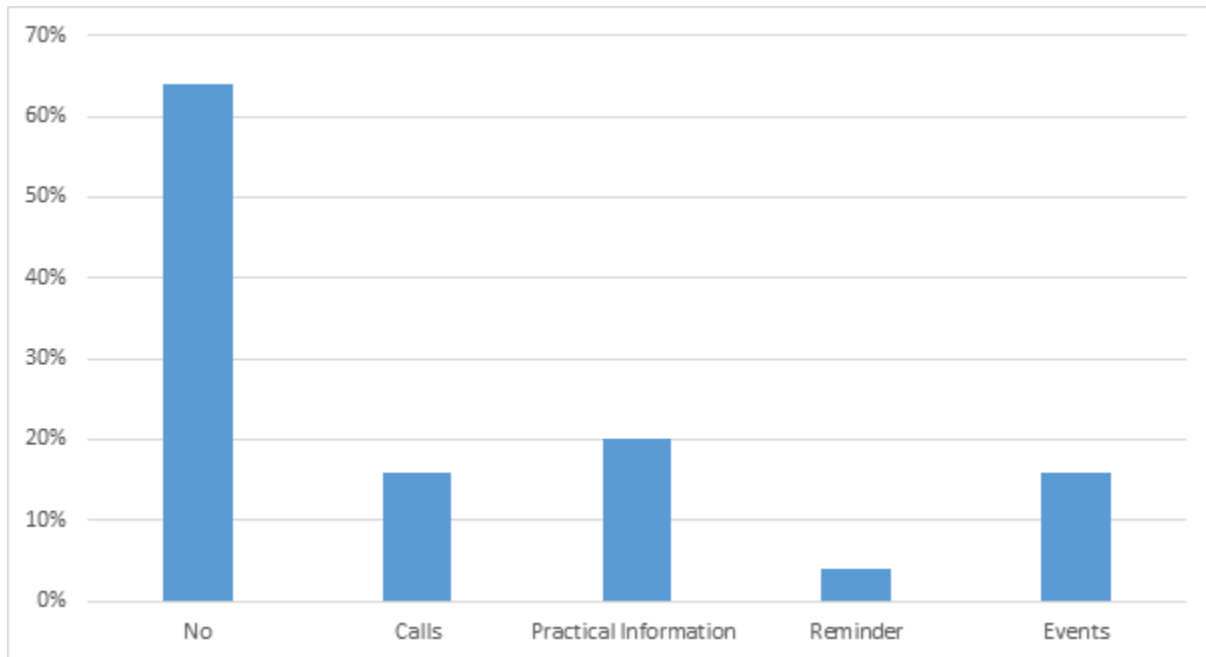
Universities paid huge attention to the online/distance learning quality assurance measures, the majority of HEIs (66.7%) stated that special measures for quality control and monitoring have been developed and introduced.

The issue of digitalization of international mobility procedures have been raised on many international coordination meetings, as well as mentioned in recommendations in ICM monitoring reports: “Digitalize the mobility process to avoid overloaded paper work before and after mobility”. More than 66% of HEIs participating in the survey responded that all procedures related to the ICM calls were switched to the online regime. Alongside it has to be highlighted that some universities were practicing online tools in the application selection process before the pandemic already.

25% of HEIs participating in the survey confirmed that they have successfully used electronic tools in ICM process administration. Receiving applications, individual consultations, electronic documents and online assessment tools have been adapted and implemented.

On the other hand, more than 66% of HEIs mentioned that they are not using Erasmus+ application (erasmusapp.eu) in everyday activities of international relations offices. But as we can see on the chart below, the rest 34% is using the application quite successfully.

Figure 2. Usage of Erasmus+ application by Georgian HEIs

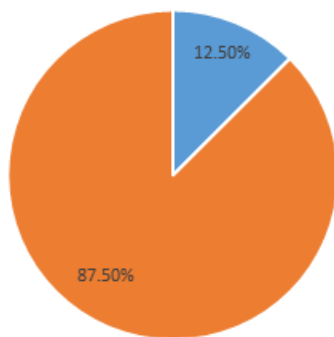


Problems of Outgoing Mobility

As mentioned above in the beginning of 2020 the overall approach taken by programme country universities was not to cancel, but postpone all envisaged mobilities for next semesters. From the second semester of 2020 the component of student virtual mobility (physical location at host country) was actively introduced by programme and partner countries. As reported by Georgian HEIs no significant changes and problems linked to virtual mobility have been revealed in terms of learning activities.

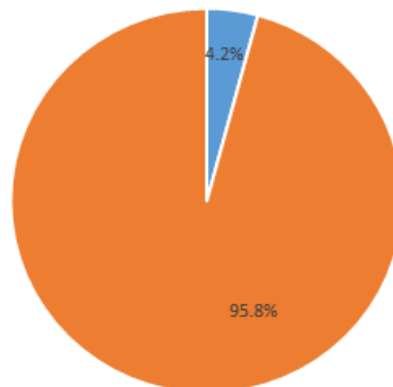
Figure 3.

Problems in terms of credit aquisition



■ Yes ■ No

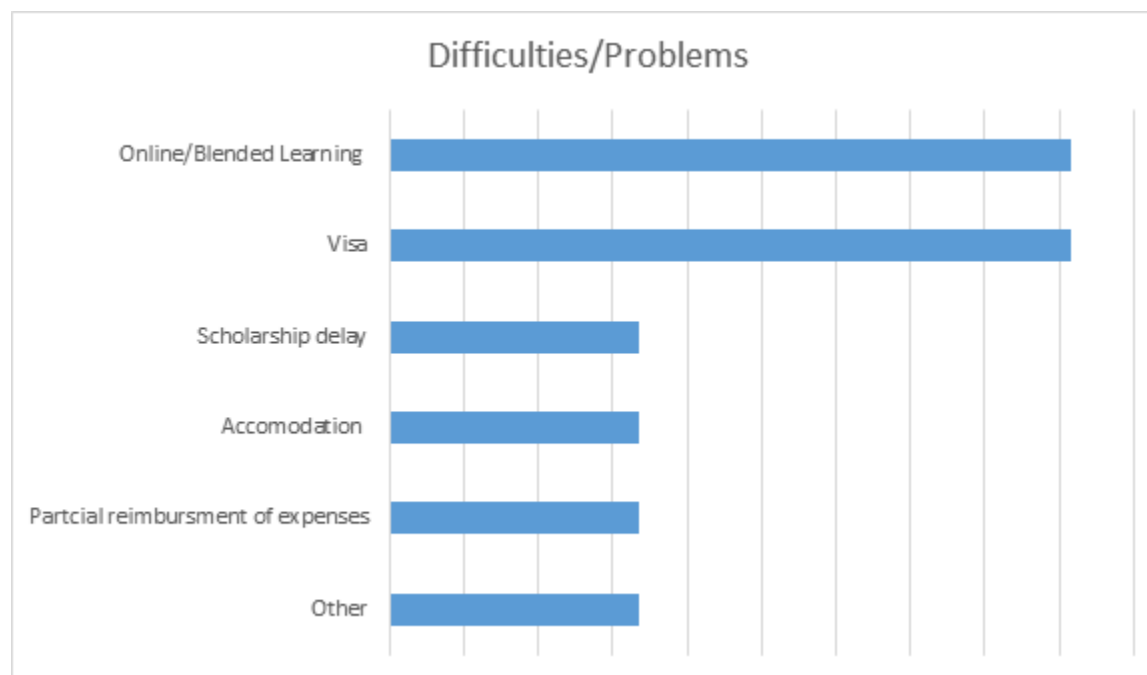
Problems in terms of credit recognition



■ Yes ■ No

Nevertheless, some problems and difficulties regarding mobility activities have been highlighted by outgoing exchange students after returning to the home institutions. The problems mostly cover visa issues, accommodation, incompliance of study courses, acquisition of credits and delay of scholarships at the place. So, mainly the problems remained same as before pandemic, and in some cases have been expanded. The travel documents, PCR test and the process of obtaining visas were more complicated and needed additional time and funds. But taking into consideration the data received from the survey we can assume that the pandemic has not dramatically changed the scope of problems related to student mobility.

Figure 4. List of problems faced by mobile Erasmus+ students



As shown in the statistical data below, student mobility was more or less successfully switched to the online format and virtual mobilities were largely practiced. But the situation looks quite different in terms of staff mobility: majority of mobilities were rescheduled as programme country universities offered to postpone staff mobilities for 2021-2022 academic year. It was difficult to adjust and reschedule online lecture activities for invited academic staff, taking into consideration the decision of programme country partners to declare virtual staff mobility activities as non-reimbursable, which decreased the interest from both participant parties.

One of the most useful activity for administrative staff - job shadowing (as stated by the university staff: “using this “job shadowing” component will support to obtain diverse experience during mobility visits” - [Erasmus+ Staff Mobility Impact and Challenges at Georgian Higher Education Institutions, National Erasmus+ Office Georgia, 2019](#)) was practically impossible to implement because of travel restrictions.

In addition to above mentioned issues, programme country universities were obliged to issue a confirmation letter of the urgent need for a physical visit of academic/administrative staff for border crossing, that also became quite a problem.

The data of administrative staff mobility activities in terms of participation in virtual staff weeks is more positive, as virtual staff weeks were welcomed and implemented by significant number of universities.

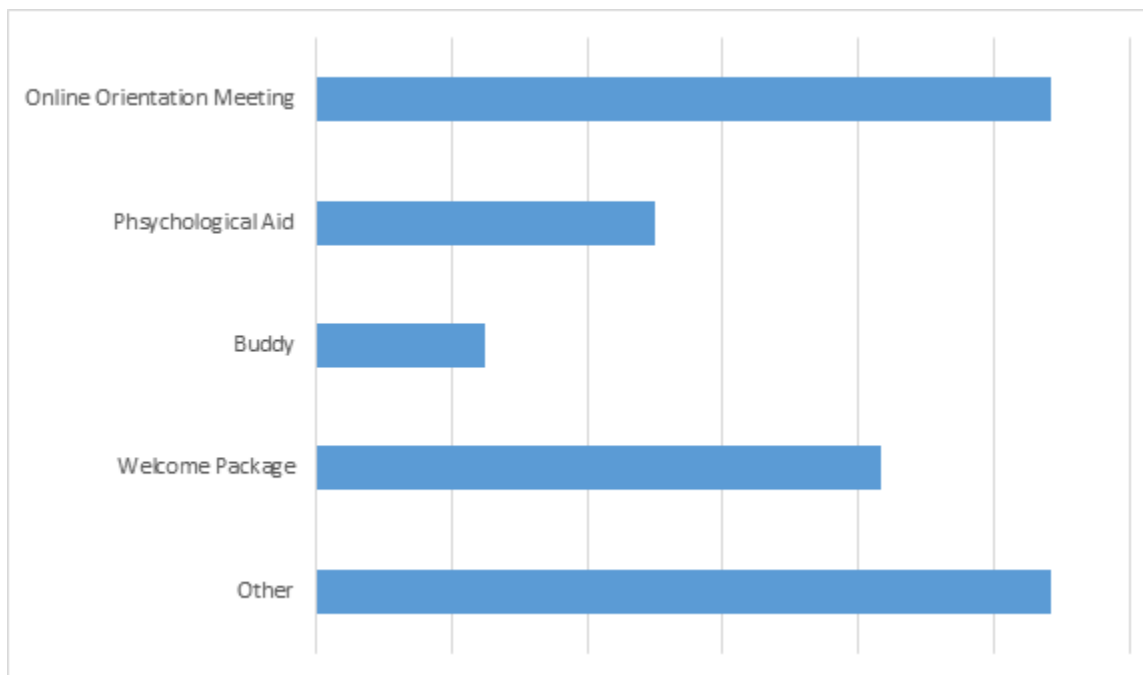
Figure 5.



Problems of Incoming Mobility

As mentioned above the virtual student mobility activities (physically located in Georgia) were practiced by local HEIs from the second semester of 2020. Up to 80% of receiving Georgian HEIs have stated that the quality of offered online courses for incoming ICM students was sufficient and students were provided with comprehensive service. Different kinds of supporting activities taking into consideration the Covid-19 pandemic were proposed.

Figure 6.



77% of HEIs say that the presence of incoming exchange students on virtual lectures and classes was satisfactory and the online teaching process was implemented successfully.

No additional problems related to pandemic have been reported in terms of incoming student activities. The difficulties in terms of awarding credits and incompletion of courses remained the same as in before pandemic period. According to the data received, more than 70% of students have successfully completed their studies at Georgian universities.

Taking into consideration that in 2021 we are still facing Covid-19 pandemic and travel and mobility difficulties, we explored if virtual mobility would be still actual during 2021-2022 academic year. According to the survey majority of HEIs stated that their programme partner institutions have offered to implement next round of mobilities via blended/online learning methods in terms of students and staff mobilities.

Figure 7.

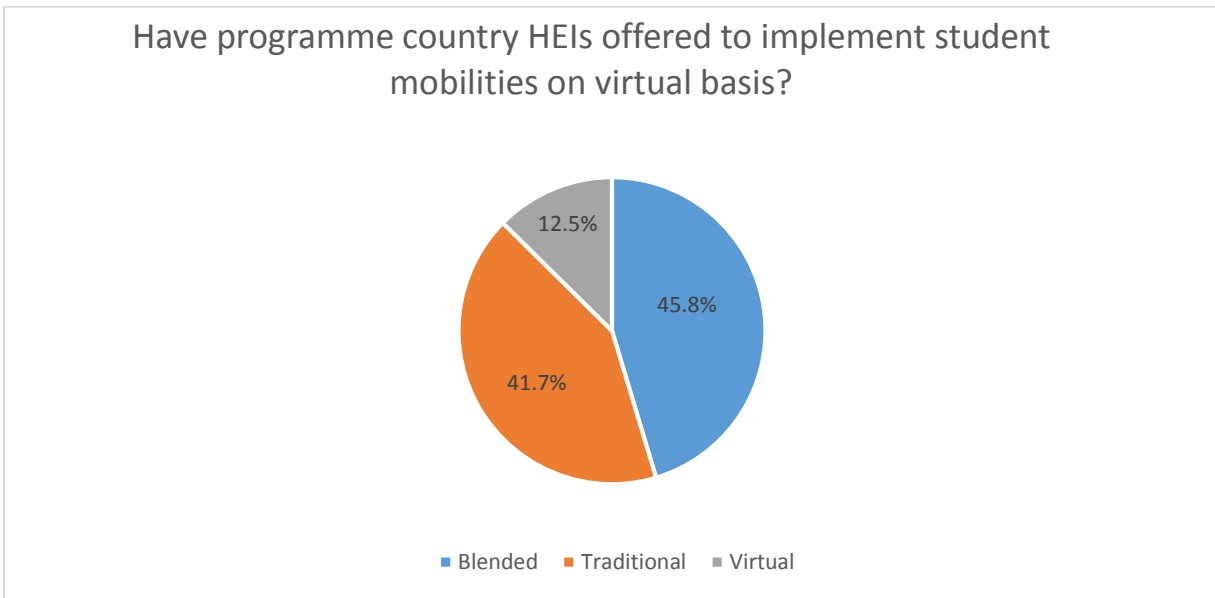
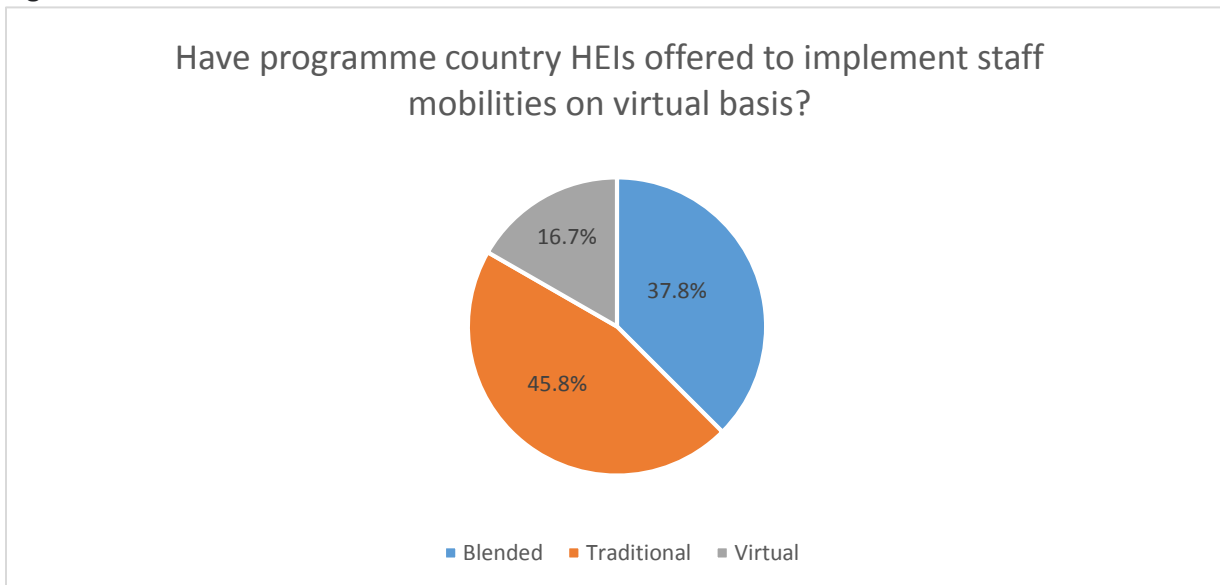


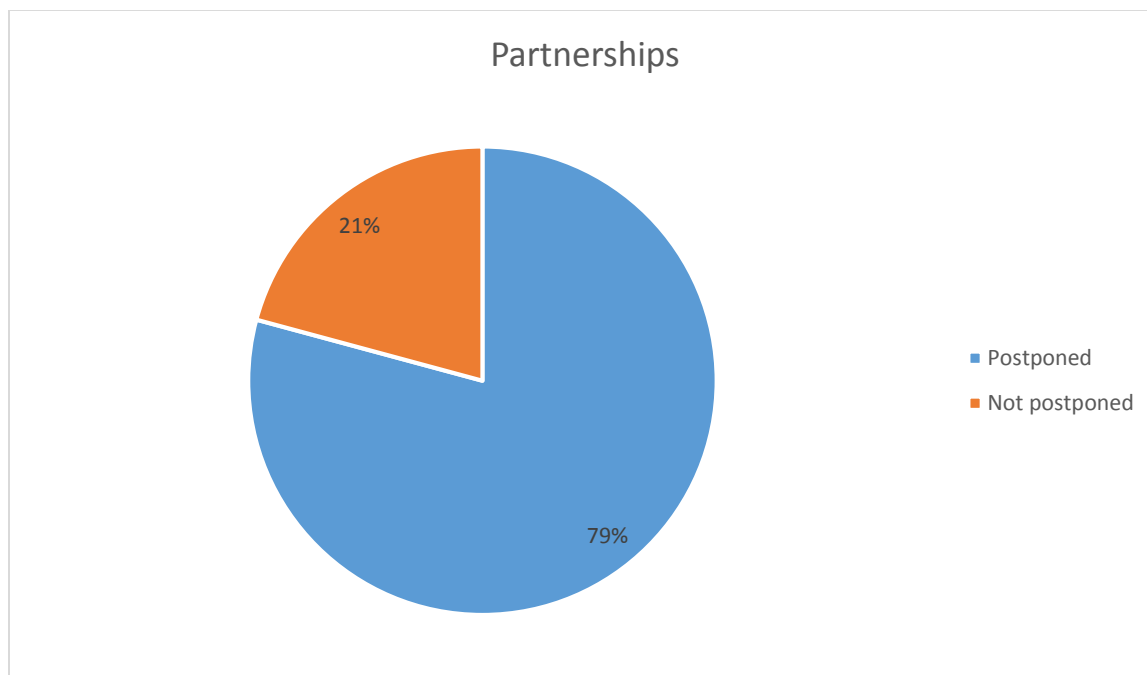
Figure 8.



Statistical data

Up to 80% of the partnership agreements have been postponed for various reasons. In the above-mentioned period, the mobility of 721 students and 482 academic / administrative staff was planned initially, however a number of ICM exchanges have been either postponed or cancelled. The main reason for the postponement/cancellation of the funded contracts is the situation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the internal regulations of the host universities or receiving countries.

Figure 9. Have partnership agreements been postponed due to a pandemic?



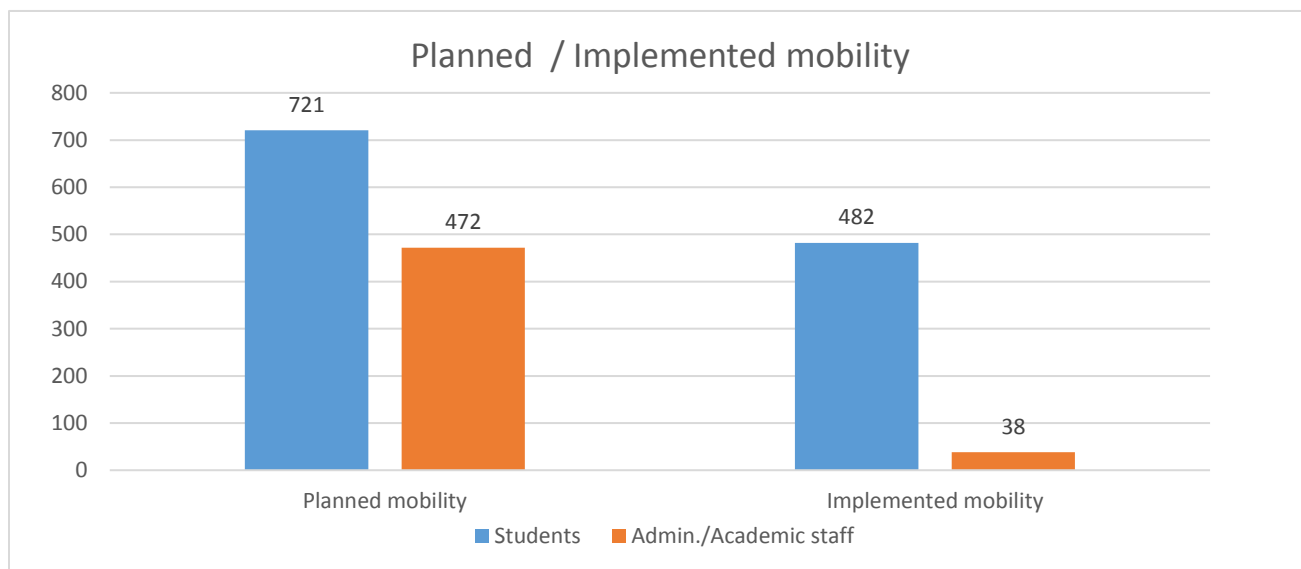
Based on data from 24 universities in most cases the mobilities were postponed in hopes of recovery next year. As for the number of completely cancelled cases, the mobility of 67 students and 71 academic/administrative staff (in total 138) was suspended during the first semester 2020/2021.

Up to 510 outgoing mobilities have been implemented so far with 472 students and 38 academic/administrative staff. These numbers are encouraging, and growing in the wake of a successful battle with Covid-19.

During the same period, Georgian higher education institutions received 84 persons: 78 students and 6 academic / administrative staff.

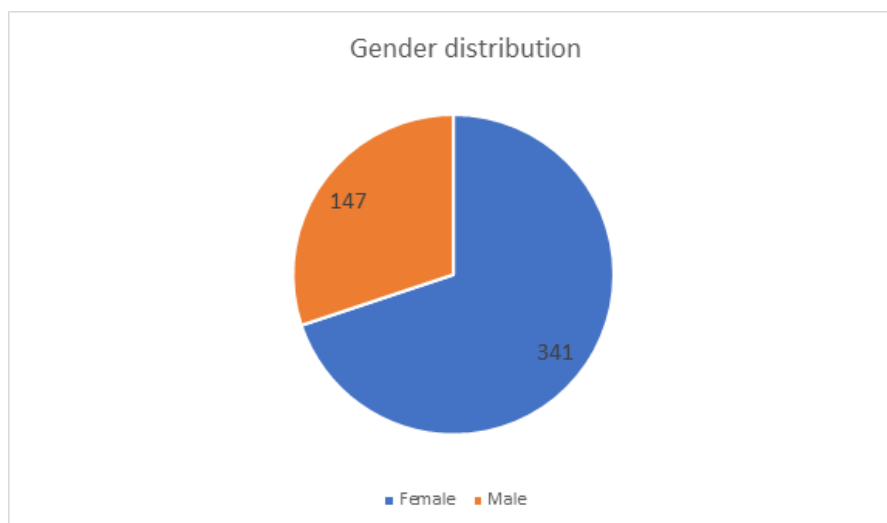
It should also be noted, that after the transition of the initial pandemic wave of February-July 2020 semester, the implementation of student mobility was no longer delayed and the allocated quotas were almost fully utilized.

Figure 10.



As part of the survey, it was also possible to sort the mobility participants by gender, from which it appears that a large proportion of the participants are female. And the data was distributed as follows - the number of female beneficiaries – 341 (69%), and the number of male beneficiaries - 147 (31%). This proportional distribution of gender balance is fully compatible with Erasmus + combined statistics, and does not reflect the exceptional situation. Such distribution is common in different areas of the programme as well.

Figure 11.



The survey reveals that 26 of the beneficiaries (2020/2021years) have repeatedly participated in Erasmus + credit mobility.

Conclusions

As a conclusion it can be stated that the Covid-19 outbreak significantly affected the ICM mobility project implementation. The impact of the pandemic has touched the process at institutional and individual levels. The majority of Georgian HEIs organized different types of capacity building activities for administrative and academic staff to support online teaching activities and introduced special online/distance learning quality assurance measures to offer high quality services for students. The digitalization of mobility process was actively practiced.

In terms of student mobilities the process was more or less successfully switched to the online regime. Local universities adjusted to new circumstances and implemented series of capacity building activities for academic staff and administration. No specific problems linked to virtual mobilities were revealed. Before pandemic difficulties and problems related to student mobility activities remained and, in some cases, (obtaining visas and travel documents, accommodation or delay of scholarships) were deepened.

According to the feedback from the representatives of the international relations offices, the interest in virtual mobility and the number of received applications have significantly decreased: in the case of virtual mobility, quality of teaching and learning, possibility of real socialization is severely limited and often lectures are even recorded instead of live streaming. Consequently, the basic idea of such exchange programmes - to study and gain experience in the European countries is questioned and seems less attractive for students as they prefer to implement physical mobilities.

The implementation of staff mobility projects was less successful due to problematic issues reported by the participants:

- Rescheduling of online classes for invited academic staff was problematic;
- Job shadowing practices were impossible because of online teaching regime;
- Virtual mobility possibilities for academic were rare;
- Per diems and reimbursement of virtual mobility costs were considered unjustified;
- Motivation of academic staff from both sides was very low, taking into consideration no networking and collaboration possibilities with colleagues alongside online classes and without financial incentives.

The overall data on staff mobility gives additional reason for rethinking the concept of academic staff mobility in general. According to the study "[Mobility Impact and Challenges at Georgian Higher Education Institutions](#)" conducted by NEO Georgia and HEREs in 2019, the staff mobility is a potentially effective instrument for organizational and institutional development of the institutions. Respondents of the study underlined four main directions that make staff mobility essential for enhancement of educational institution:

- Curriculum development;
- Enhancement of social networks;
- Self-confidence of the staff;
- Intercultural awareness raising.

Together with teaching practices it would be helpful to use mobility as a networking opportunity and solid basis for further collaboration and joint projects. Alongside the main instrument currently used by HEIs is

“teaching” it is reasonable to combine other instruments such as “job shadowing”, training and workshops with teaching activities. But in the existing limited time frames and conditions it is difficult to absorb all the benefits and opportunities of the programme. In order to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of ICM programmes it would be important to think on the revision of the concept and structure of the programme in this regard.

Best practices seen:

- Mostly rapid response from universities to the emergency situation;
- Timely instruction and retraining of the staff of higher education institutions to enable usage of modern virtual teaching resources;
- Involvement of the university administration in the digitalization of the educational and administrative processes;
- Increased attention and patronage of exchange programme beneficiaries during the pandemic;
- Offering special services for mobility students coming to Georgia (buddy, psychological aid, orientation meetings, welcome packages);
- Recognition of (virtually accumulated) credits;
- Full virtual / blended learning opportunities for students;
- Low rate of completely terminated partnership agreements;
- High rate of absorbed student mobilities.

Recommendations:

This study identifies a number of factors that need to be addressed by the universities, European Commission and the National Agencies in programme countries.

The previous year’s survey and the current extensive research show a variety of positive and negative results that have been accumulated over the past year and a half (2020-2021) in terms of experiences and practicality.

For Georgian higher education institutions, it is recommended:

- To make full use of the knowledge, experience and resources gained through Erasmus + projects;
- To ensure full correspondence of the conditions stipulated in the partnership agreements with a virtual or blended learning system;
- To strengthen internal quality control mechanisms for virtual learning;
- To organize frequent trainings for academic staff for equipping them with modern virtual teaching/learning skills and resources;
- Enhance usage of the Erasmus+ app.

Recommendations and messages to European Commission and programme country HEIs:

- The high need of expanding physical mobility, while maintaining virtual mobility as a blended learning possibility;
- Possibility to HEIs to submit for project second extensions in order to absorb remaining mobility places for already selected beneficiaries;
- Visa facilitation for students;
- Timely payment of student scholarships;
- Support in accommodation search for mobile students.