

# Student Mobility in Europe in times of Covid-19

## *A Report on student mobility during the academic year 2020/2021*

Prepared for

SEA-EU: *The European University of the Seas*

by the

Erasmus Student Network Malta



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# Introduction to SEA-EU

SEA-EU joins 40 other 'European University' alliances to dream the European university of the 21st century.

SEA-EU aims to establish a distinctly international, pluri-ethnic, multilingual and interdisciplinary European University. It consists of the University of Cádiz (Spain) as the lead partner, along with Université de Bretagne Occidentale in Brest (France), University of Kiel (Germany), University of Gdańsk (Poland), University of Split (Croatia) and the University of Malta (Malta).

The Erasmus Student Network took it upon itself to conduct this research for the SEA-EU Alliance in order to analyse and understand what impact COVID-19 has had on international student mobility, and how each university of the Alliance has responded to the COVID-19 emergency.

## Data overview

Across the two semesters of academic year 2020/2021, 99 students availed themselves of the opportunity to go on an Erasmus Higher Education Exchange Mobility through the *European Universities of the Seas Alliance* (SEA-EU), a 'European Universities' initiative. These 99 students are all enrolled as full-time degree students at any one of the six SEA-EU universities and went on an Erasmus exchange to another SEA-EU university during the 2020/21 academic year. For instance, a student enrolled at the University of Cadiz went on an Erasmus exchange to the University of Malta. Henceforth students who went on mobility from one SEA-EU university to another shall be referred to below as 'SEA-EU students'.

The survey collected 70 answers, out of which 38 respondents (54%) were SEA-EU students and therefore went on mobility from one SEA-EU university to another. The SEA-EU survey respondents represent 38.4% of the total number of SEA-EU students as identified by the 6 partner universities of the Alliance. The remaining 32 respondents either attended a SEA-EU University but went on mobility to a non-SEA-EU University; or conversely, attended a non-SEA-EU University but went on a mobility to a SEA-EU University. Therefore, in one way or another, all survey respondents have a connection to at least one SEA-EU University. For this reason, the answers of the non-SEA-EU Students were also considered for the purposes of this survey, since these students had an experience similar to that of SEA-EU Students. In this case, if a particular student was enrolled as a full degree student at a SEA-EU university, but went on mobility to a non-SEA-EU university, the answer pertinent to the home university will be considered only; and vice-versa, whereby a student who was not enrolled at a SEA-EU university, but went on mobility to a SEA-EU institution, have their answers related to the host university considered. This explains the differences in total survey responses from outgoing and incoming universities, as seen in [Figure 1](#) below.

**Figure 1: SEA-EU Students**

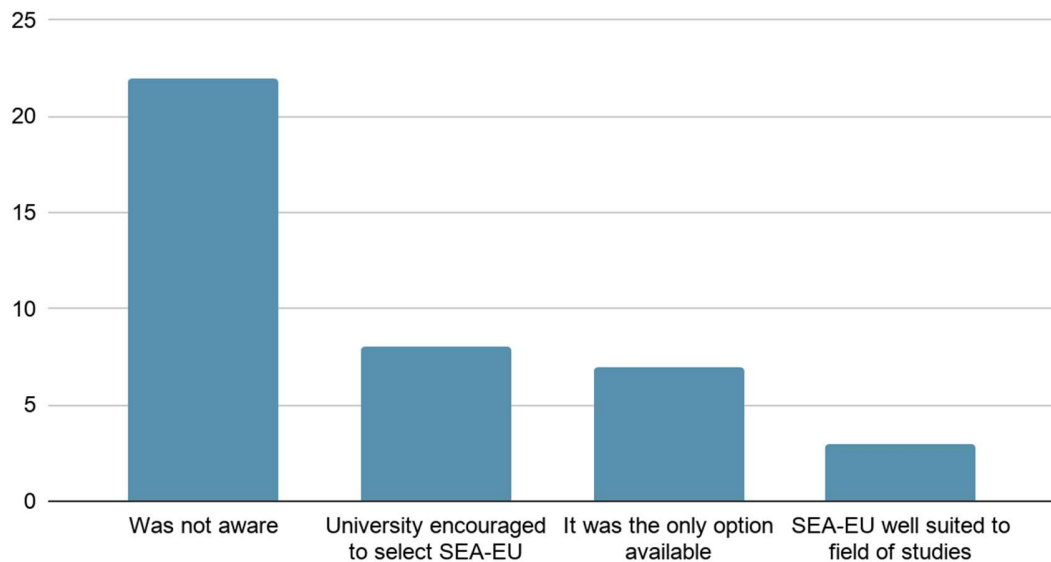
University	Total Outgoing SEA-EU Students	Survey Responses Outgoing SEA-EU Students	Survey Responses Total Outgoing from SEA-EU Universities	Total Incoming SEA-EU Students	Survey Responses Incoming SEA-EU Students	Survey Responses Total Incoming to SEA-EU Universities
Université de Bretagne Occidentale in Brest	37	17	18	4	2	2
University of Cadiz	17	4	4	28	10	11
University of Gdansk	25	11	26	13	1	17
University of Kiel	5	2	2	3	2	2
University of Malta	2	2	2	27	11	11
University of Split	13	2	2	24	13	13
Total	99	39	54	99	39	56

## Perception of SEA-EU

From those students who participated in a mobility through SEA-EU, 22 respondents mentioned that they were not aware that they participated in an Erasmus mobility through the *European Universities of the Seas Alliance*. Four of those 22 respondents even stated that they did *not* go on mobility through the SEA-EU Alliance, even though both their home and host universities are members of the Alliance. Of the remaining 16 SEA-EU students who were aware of the Alliance, seven respondents said that they chose to participate through the Alliance because it was the only option available; while another eight highlighted that their home universities encouraged them to select a SEA-EU university for their Erasmus mobility. From those respondents who purposefully chose to go on Erasmus to a SEA-EU designated university, three said that they chose to go on Erasmus through the SEA-EU Alliance because their studies are within the maritime/ marine field, so it was the perfect choice for them. Another student cited location as a motivating factor. See [Figure 2](#)).

**Figure 2:**

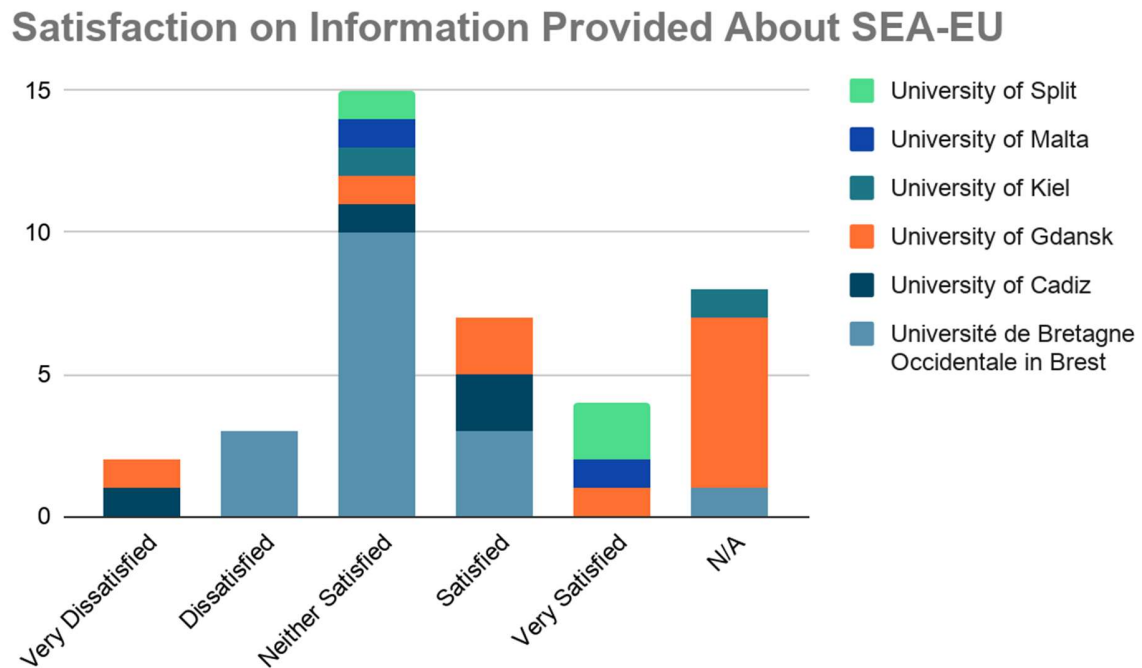
### Reasons for choosing SEA-EU University



These responses indicate that 38.5% of the SEA-EU students were aware of the SEA-EU Alliance while the remaining 61.5% were not aware of the Alliance.

Furthermore, when asked how satisfied they were with the information on SEA-EU provided by their home university, the majority of SEA-EU students (60.5%) gave a neutral response by saying that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the information provided. 26.3% of SEA-EU students were positively satisfied with the information provided by their home university, with the remaining 13.3% stating that they were unhappy with the information or lack of information provided about the SEA-EU Alliance. These responses are tabulated as [Figure 3](#).

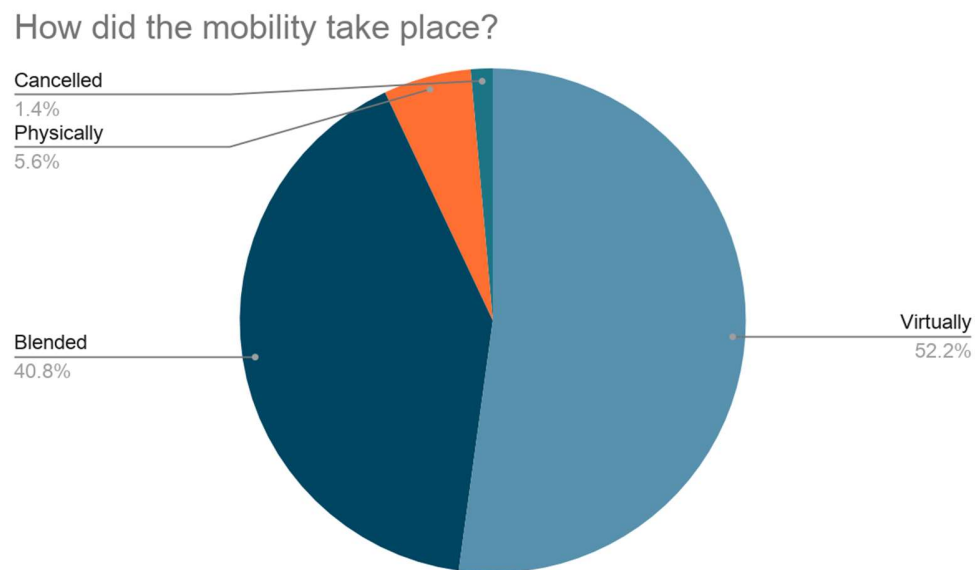
**Figure 3:**



## Impact of COVID-19

The majority of university lectures were held in a virtual setting online: 52.1% of the students reported that their lectures were held online, while 40.8% said that they benefited from a combination of virtual and physical learning activities. 5.6% of respondents stated that they had physical lectures, while only one student reported that their mobility was cancelled. In this case, the mobility was cancelled by that student themselves as they were unsure about the COVID situation in their host country and decided it would be best if they returned to their home country. These responses are tabulated as [Figure 4](#).

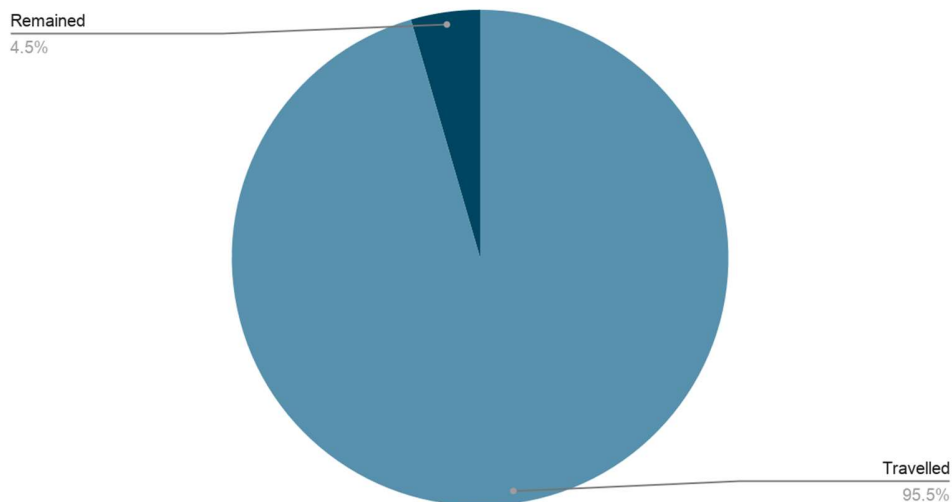
**Figure 4:**



The majority of university courses were being held online during the 2020/21 academic year, and the global pandemic has had a major impact on international travel. And yet, 95.5% of the student respondents reported that they were able to travel to their host country and follow their online lectures from there. They thus could enjoy the benefit of mobility and experiencing life in a different European country (albeit with all the health restrictions obliged by the raging pandemic). Only 4.5% of students did not travel to their host country but were able to follow the lectures of their host university online while remaining in their home country. These details are tabulated as Figure 5.

**Figure 5:**

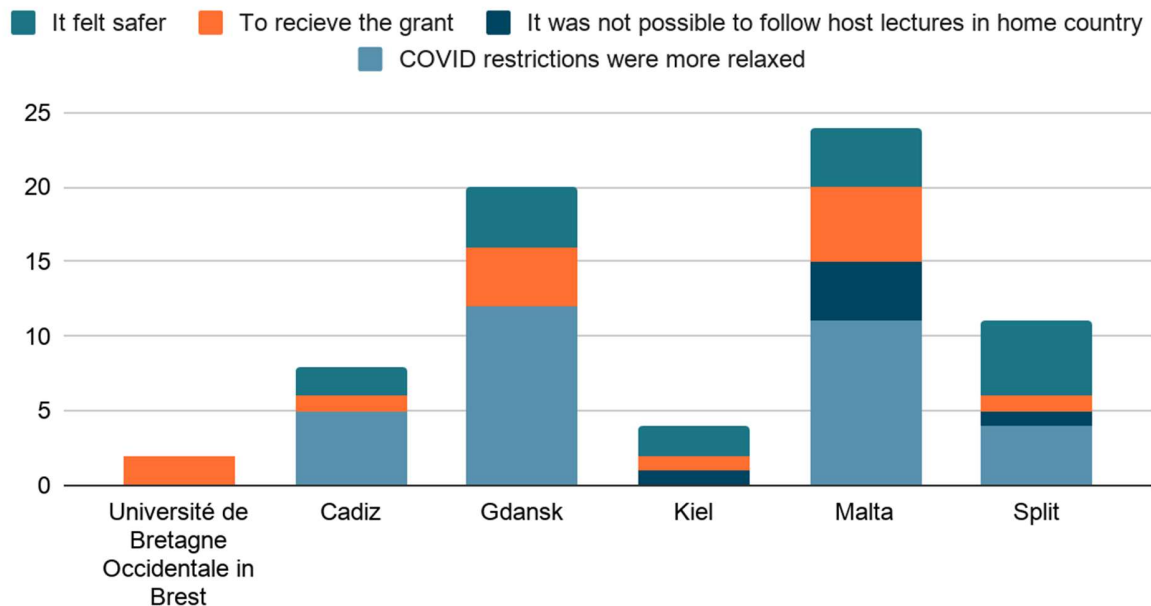
### Location of students following online lectures



When asked why they decided to travel to their host university country, the majority of the students replied that they chose to travel as the COVID-19 restrictions in their host country were more relaxed than their home country (58.6%); that it felt safer to travel and live in the host country (44.8%); that they were required to travel to their host country in order to receive the grant (37.9%); and that it was not possible for them to suitably follow the host university lectures in their home country (24.1%). Only one student mentioned that the reason they decided to leave their home country and follow online lectures at their host university was to live the so-called 'Erasmus experience'. Therefore, although the Covid-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to most people's lives, these students appeared to have nevertheless taken the decision to leave their country and travel in the midst of a health crisis because they wanted to get away from their home country and experience internationalisation. (The relevant data is tabulated as [Figure 6](#)).

**Figure 6:**

### Reasons for travelling to host university county

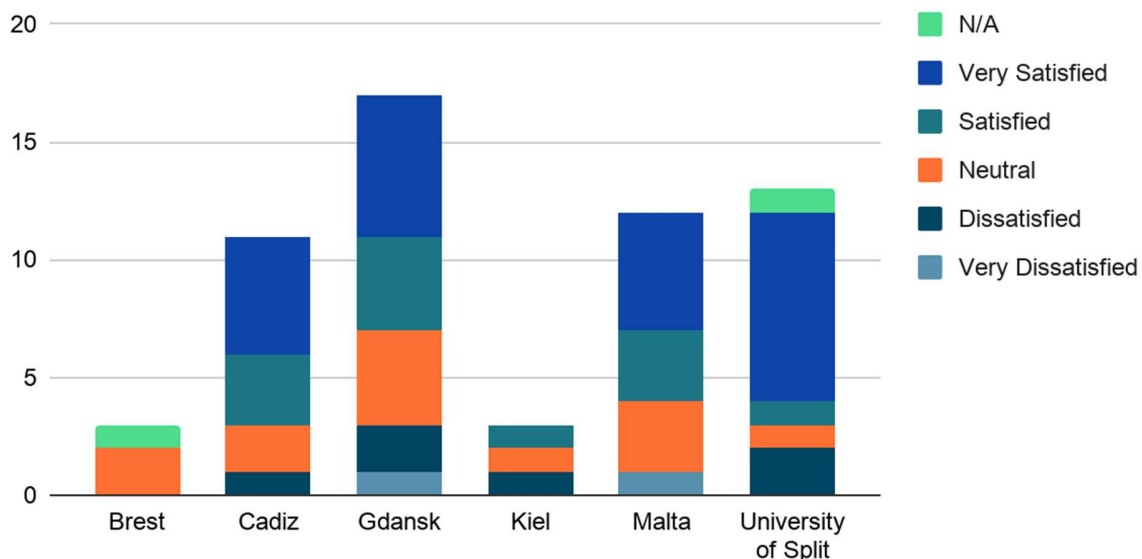


Respondents were asked to what extent they felt there was enough information available on health and safety measures provided by their host universities. Overall, the majority of students responded positively to this statement: 64.2% of respondents stating that they were happy with the information they received on the COVID-19 situation in their host country. 14.1% of students disagreed with this statement as they reported that they were disappointed with the information they received about the COVID-19 situation in their host country. The remaining 21.7% provided a neutral answer, stating that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. (Details available as [Figure 7](#)).



**Figure 7:**

### Satisfaction on information provision on COVID Situation in host country by host university



During their time in their host country, the students were afforded different types of support throughout their stay. The majority of students (60.6%) said that they received updated information on the government COVID-19 related restrictions in their host country, followed by academic support (52.1%), psychological support (43.7%), accommodation support (29.6%), medical support (21.1%), support during mandatory quarantine (16.9%), linguistic support (15.5%), and financial support (12.7%). Only one student reported that they did not receive any additional support.

***“I received psychological and academic support by the University, and ESN provided support with accommodation and the latest information on Covid. I got medical support from healthcare professionals”. - SEA-EU Student on mobility at the University of Malta from the University of Gdansk.***

***“The host university is very active and sends a lot of information by mail and the student association too. There is therefore a follow-up of Erasmus and information on COVID (ex: place to undergo COVID tests or receive the vaccine)”. - SEA-EU Student on mobility at the University of Split from the Université de Bretagne Occidentale in Brest.***

***“During my quarantine, a member of the university brought me food every other day. This person also helped me with the German administration system, especially in terms of linguistics. The ESN often shared news about Covid-19 and rules about it”.*** - SEA-EU Student on mobility at the University of Kiel from the Université de Bretagne Occidentale in Brest.

## Treatment of Students Diagnosed with COVID-19

From those students that went on mobility to a SEA-EU university, six students reported that they contracted COVID-19 during their mobility. All six of these students went on mobility to the University of Gdansk. When asked what type of additional support services were offered by the University of Gdansk for students who contracted the virus, three of these students reported that they were offered: special accommodation to quarantine; transport arrangements to the COVID-19 testing centre; help with seeking medical advice; and help with purchasing and delivering provisions and groceries.

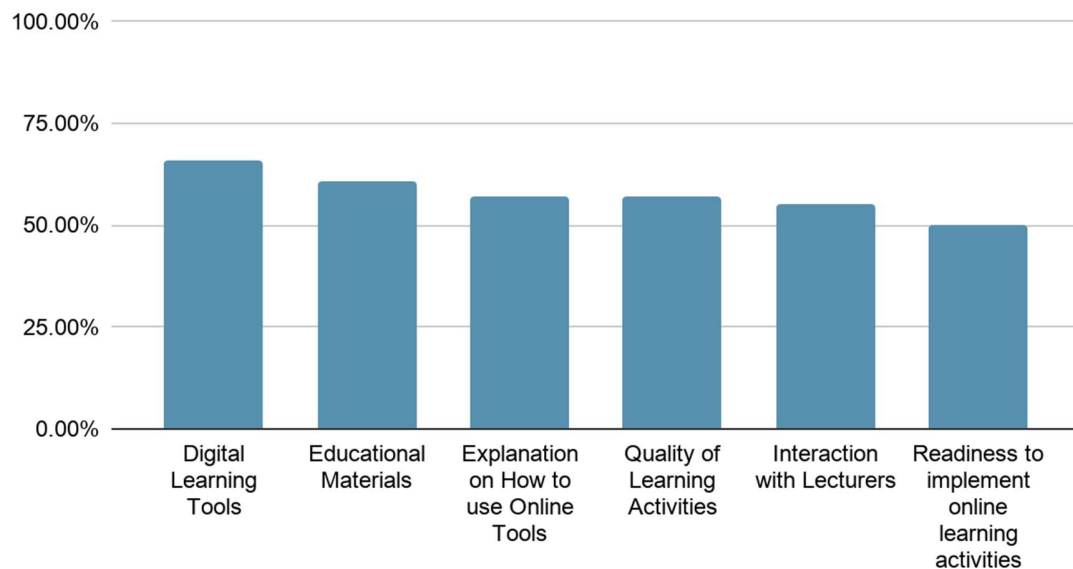
## Quality of Online Lectures

From those students that went on mobility to a SEA-EU university, a majority reported overall positive satisfaction over the means and methods used to deliver online lectures, with the majority of respondents providing positive evaluations primarily for their host university's use of digital learning tools and platforms (66.1%). This is followed by access to educational materials (60.7%), information provision on how to make use of online tools (57.1%), quality of learning activities (57.1%), interaction with lecturers during online activities (55.3%), and readiness to implement online activities (50%). Details are tabulated as Figure 8.

***“All the information needed to follow the classes was provided. Everything was done online”.*** - SEA-EU student on mobility at the University of Kiel from the Université de Bretagne Occidentale in Brest.

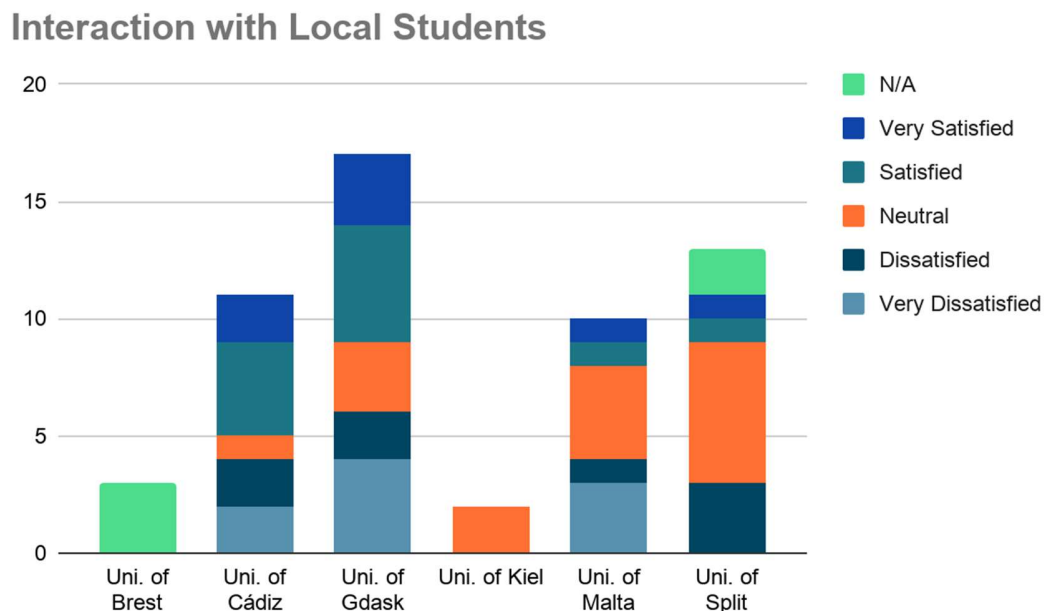
**Figure 8:**

### Overall Satisfaction of Online Lectures



On a less positive note, some uncertainty was reported with regards to the level of integration and interaction with the local students of the SEA-EU universities, as the students were split over how satisfied they were with their interaction with local students. 28.6% of respondents provided a neutral answer, 30.4% said that their interaction with local students was negative, while 32.1% of international exchange remarked that they had an overall positive interaction with local domestic students. (Details tabulated as [Figure 9](#).)

**Figure 9:**



## Health Crisis Information Provision and Support Measures

The majority of students indicated that adequate and timely information provision was in place. Most students were quite aware of the COVID-19 government restrictions and of the health and safety measures implemented by their host universities. This shows that the SEA-EU Universities and local student organisations, given the developing nature of the health crisis, have ensured that their international students received reliable information on the COVID-19 situation in their country and received information about its academic impact: such as, whether classes will be entirely online or blended, and how examinations will take place.

Furthermore, students have declared that they were given adequate support when needed. This included psychological support, logistical support for quarantine purposes and medical support. The SEA-EU Universities have ensured that the student support which is readily available to domestic students is also made available to international students.

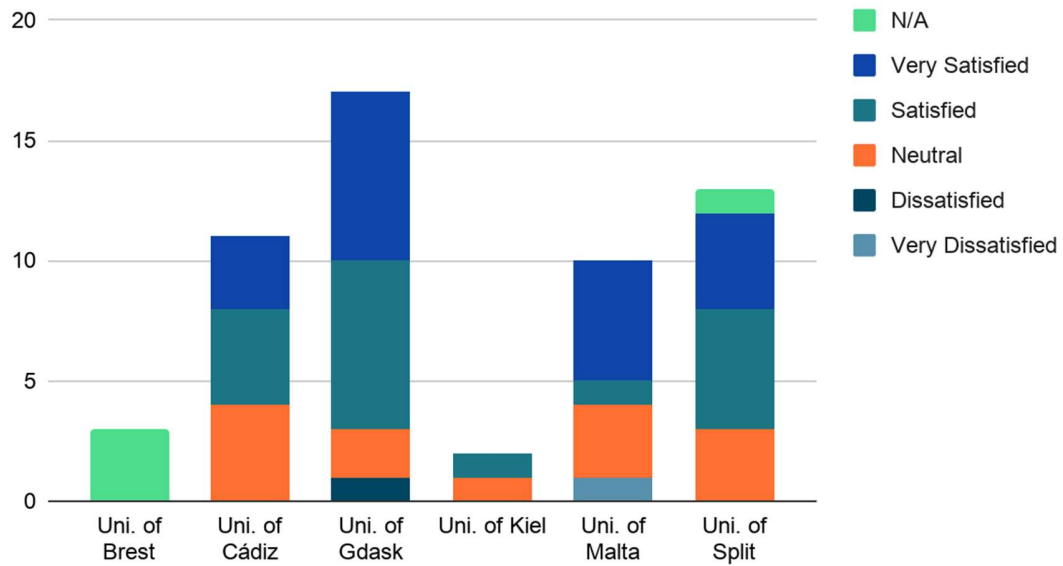
## Online Lectures

It is also clear that, since the coronavirus pandemic struck Europe in early 2020, the majority of physical classes at universities have been replaced by online classes. It is also very welcoming to see that some courses offered blended classes. The overall lack of satisfaction of international students' interaction with local domestic students suggests that, while online classes are a necessary solution to the ongoing health crisis, some elements of the 'Erasmus Experience' are regrettably missing. To this end, it should be recommended that lecturers implement actions in learning activities or elsewhere that encourage student interaction during and between online classes. Such interactions should bring international and domestic students together. Furthermore, it is also recommended that SEA-EU universities make use of student organisations' projects and initiatives - such as the ESN BuddySystem and SocialErasmus - to help with the integration process and increase the interaction of international students with local students outside the (real or virtual) lecture halls. Student leaders and volunteers of foreign student exchange organisations are encouraged to develop and to maintain direct contacts with international students and offer peer-to-peer support.

Besides this, and notwithstanding travel restrictions, social distancing rules, and the fact that the majority of classes were held online, many students still took the decision to travel to their host country and follow the online classes from there. Additionally, the majority of students highlighted that they were satisfied with the online tools provided for their classes, and with the overall quality of lectures. The student remarks suggest that the SEA-EU universities have risen to the occasion and have ensured equal access to online learning tools even for their visiting students. Furthermore, results also suggest that students on mobility were able to adapt to and cope with the different learning tools and techniques that each university has made use of when delivering different programs of study. (See tabulations as [Figures 10 to 15](#) below).

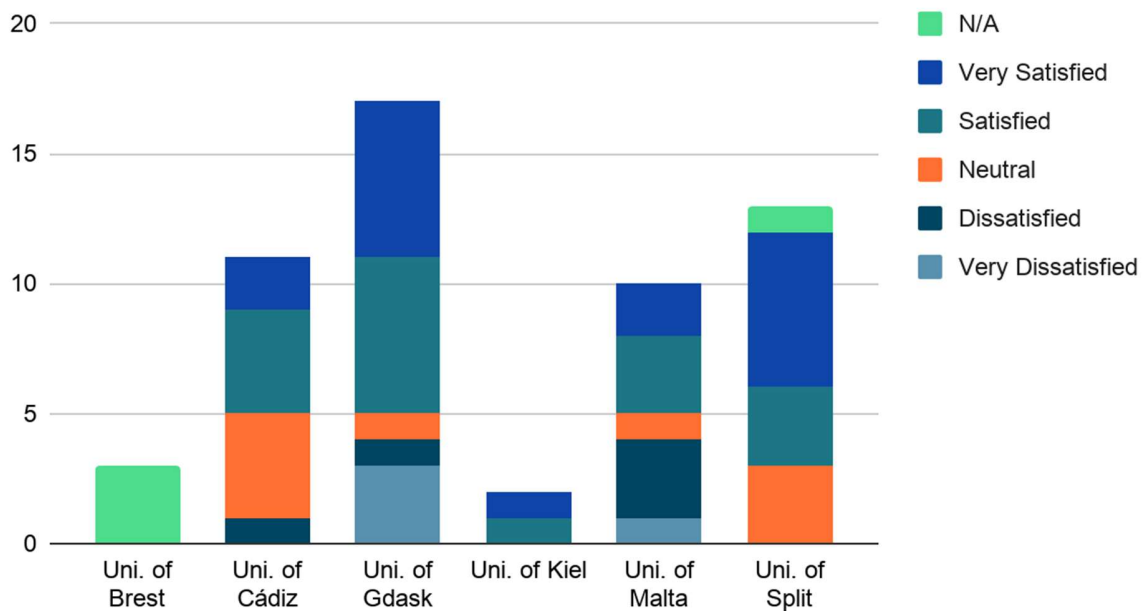
**Figure 10:**

### Evaluation of Digital Learning Tools and Platforms



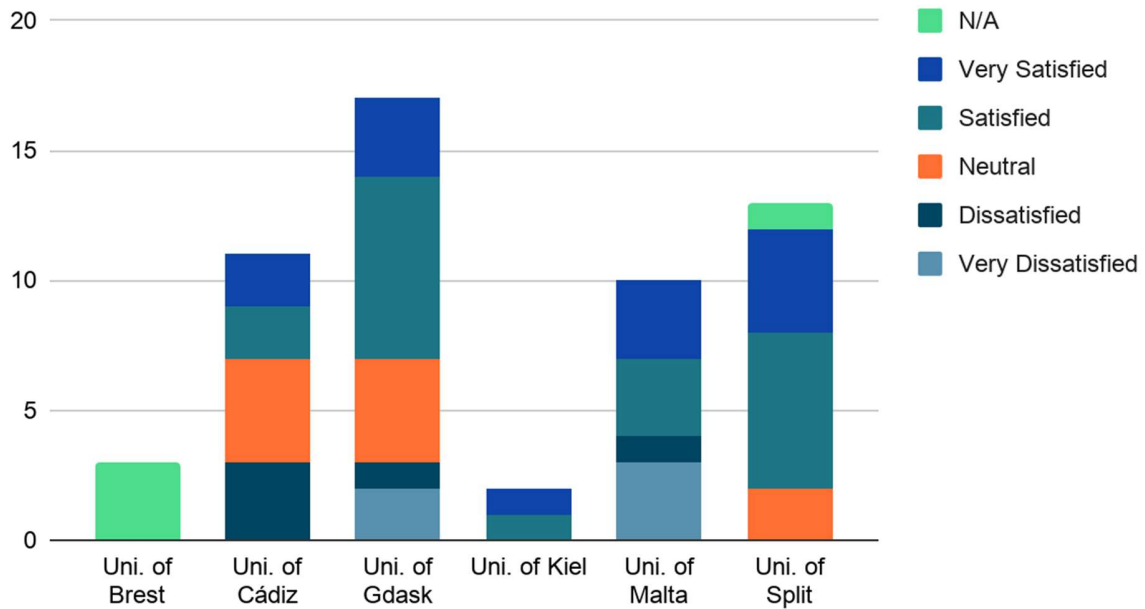
**Figure 11:**

### Access to Educational Materials



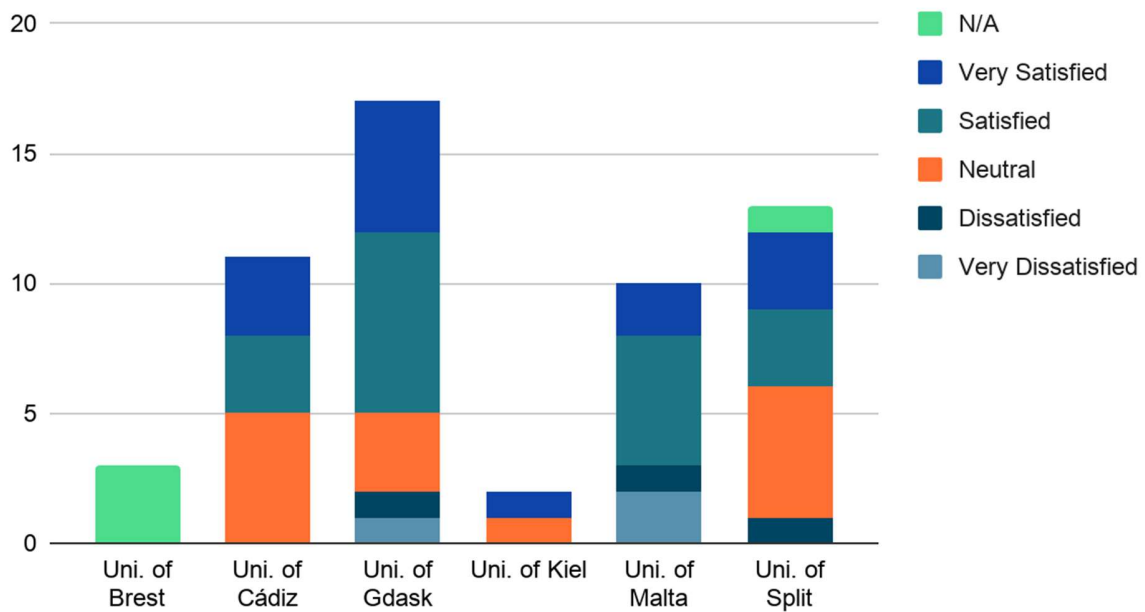
**Figure 12:**

### Explanation on how to use online tools



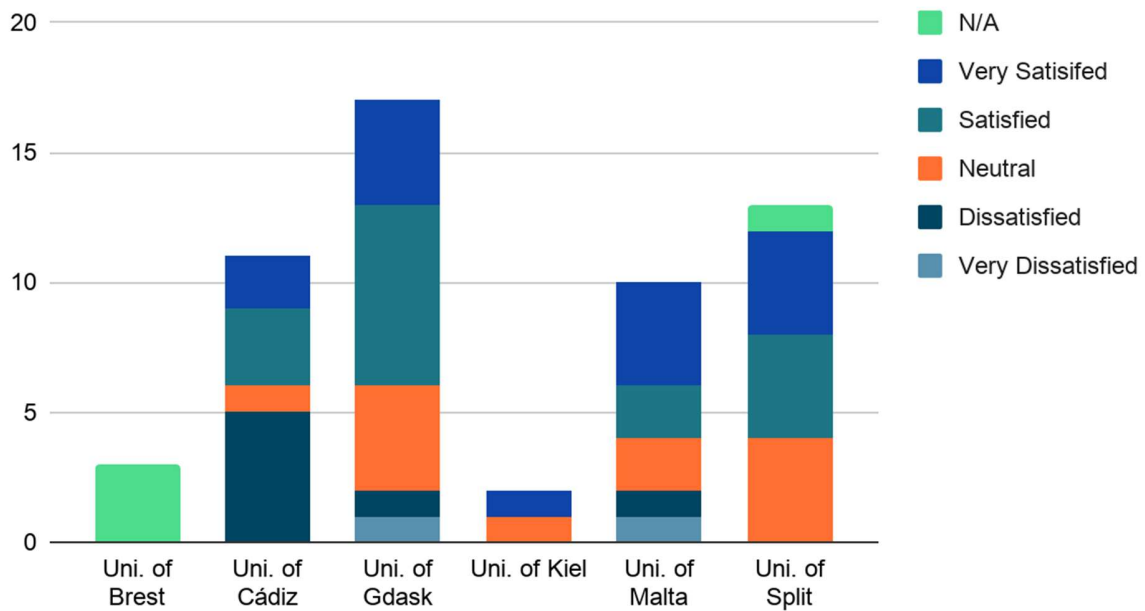
**Figure 13:**

### Quality of Learning Activities



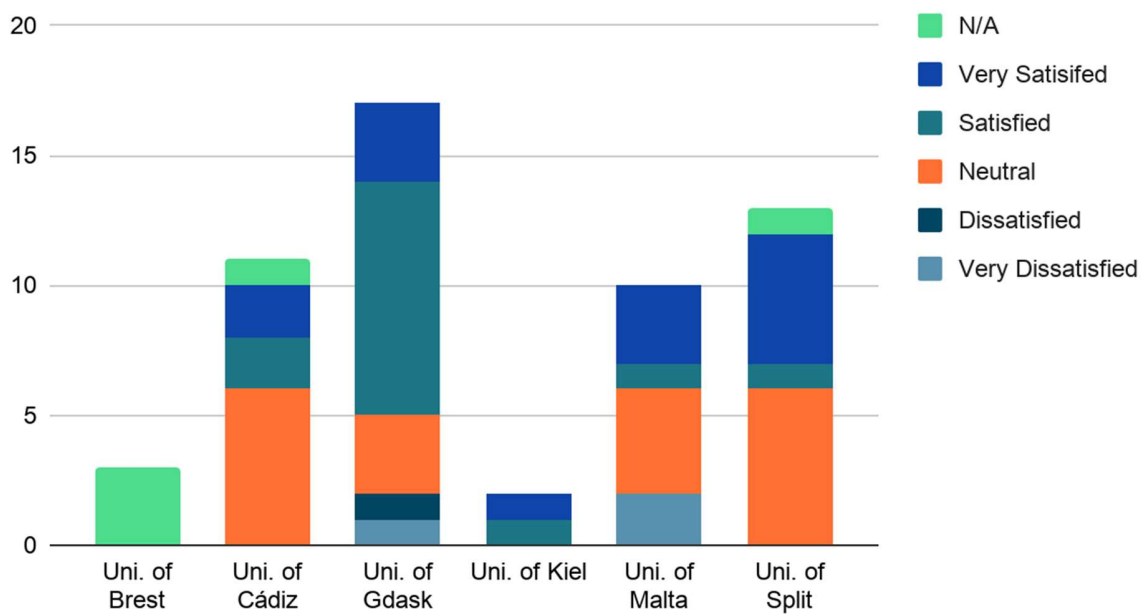
**Figure 14:**

### Interaction with lecturers



**Figure 15:**

### Readiness to implement online activities





## Conclusion

### - Awareness of SEA-EU

Many students are aware of the Erasmus programme and the opportunity to go on an exchange during their studies. However, this survey indicates that many students are (still) not aware of the SEA-EU Initiative. Admittedly, the 'European Universities' initiative is still in its infancy and that a number of planned outreach initiatives have had to be cancelled due to the ongoing health crisis. In the few instances when students were aware of the SEA-EU initiative, this was because going on Erasmus through this initiative was the only option available. In a handful of cases, students were informed about SEA-EU by their home university. It is recommended that the SEA-EU Alliance increases its efforts to promote SEA-EU to its students through dedicated information sessions for prospective Erasmus students by clearly highlighting that students may opt to go on Erasmus to a SEA-EU university.

### - Positive Student Experiences in the Age of Covid-19

Otherwise, and overall, the 'Erasmus experience' has suffered: but it resolutely lives on. It has been affected by the ongoing health situation, and has certainly aborted the aspirations of many students who would have travelled to study in another country in normal circumstances. But students are, by nature, quite enterprising and adventurous. As this report shows, many have proceeded with an Erasmus mobility experience even in the Age of Covid-19. Their reports on these experiences are overwhelmingly positive.

### - Encouraging domestic and international student interactions

Meanwhile, we kindly urge university authorities, student organisations and individual members of the academic staff and study body to remember that there may be international students attending classes with them: if classes are virtual, such students may be rendered invisible; but that does not mean that they do not exist. Reaching out to such students, involving them in group activities and encouraging their interaction is an even more pressing matter during times of Covid-19.

Let us remind ourselves of the richness and inherent value that comes from the diversity that is **Europe**, and which is so strongly epitomised and represented by the Erasmus mobility experience.

Thank you.

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