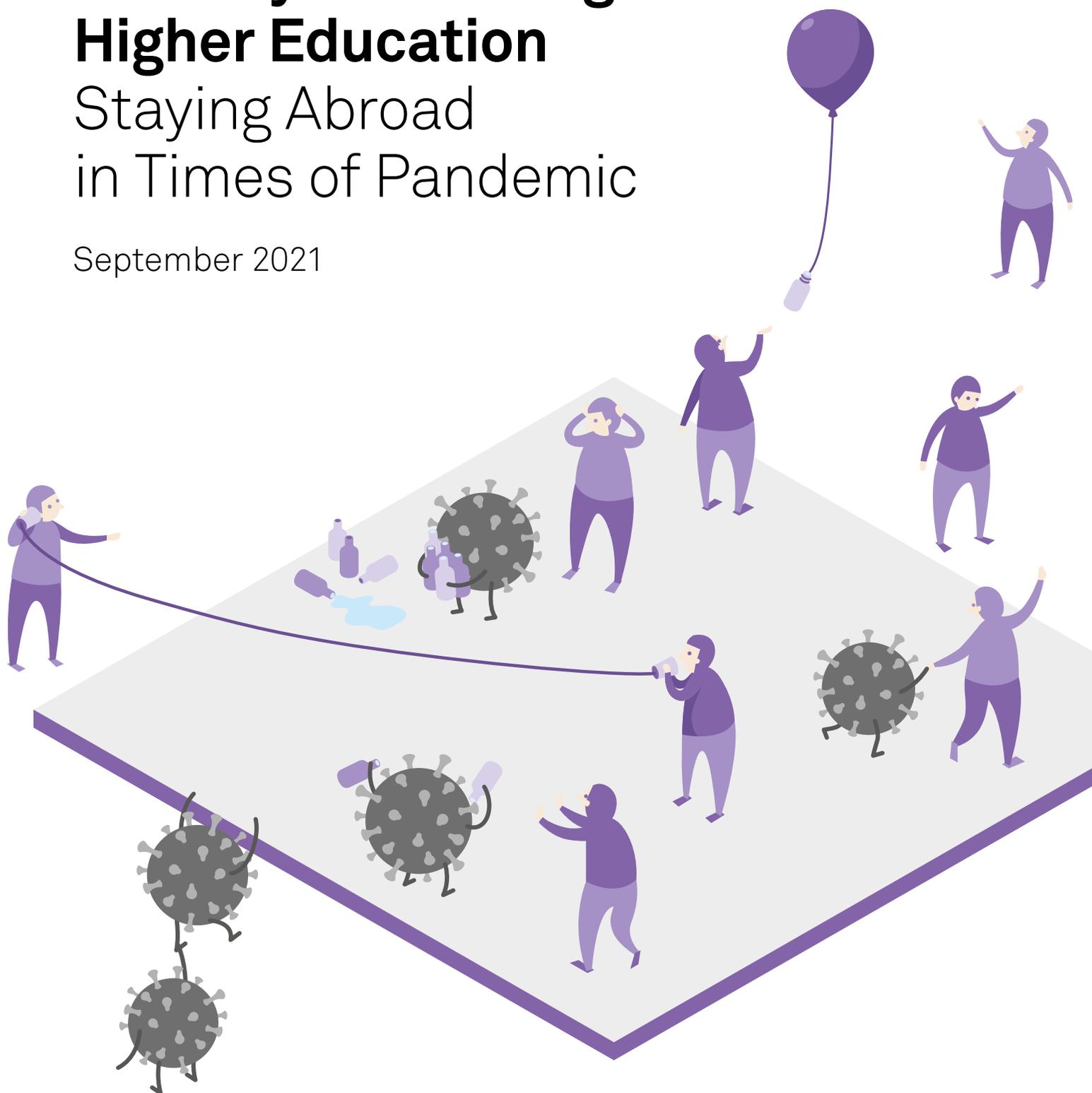


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# Mobility Monitoring Higher Education

## Staying Abroad in Times of Pandemic

September 2021



**Movetia** is the national agency for the promotion of exchanges and mobility in Switzerland, in Europe and worldwide. On behalf of the Confederation and the cantons, Movetia supports projects in school education, vocational education and training, at tertiary level, in adult education and in extracurricular youth work.

**Swiss-European Mobility Programme** is the mobility programme for higher education. SEMP promotes outgoing mobility for students, lecturers and staff of Swiss universities and colleges of higher education. Incoming mobility is also supported by SEMP. SEMP is the country's most important mobility programme for education with a budget of CHF 21 million in the academic year 2020/21. The programme is jointly implemented by Movetia and currently 47 Swiss educational institutions.

[movetia.ch](http://movetia.ch)

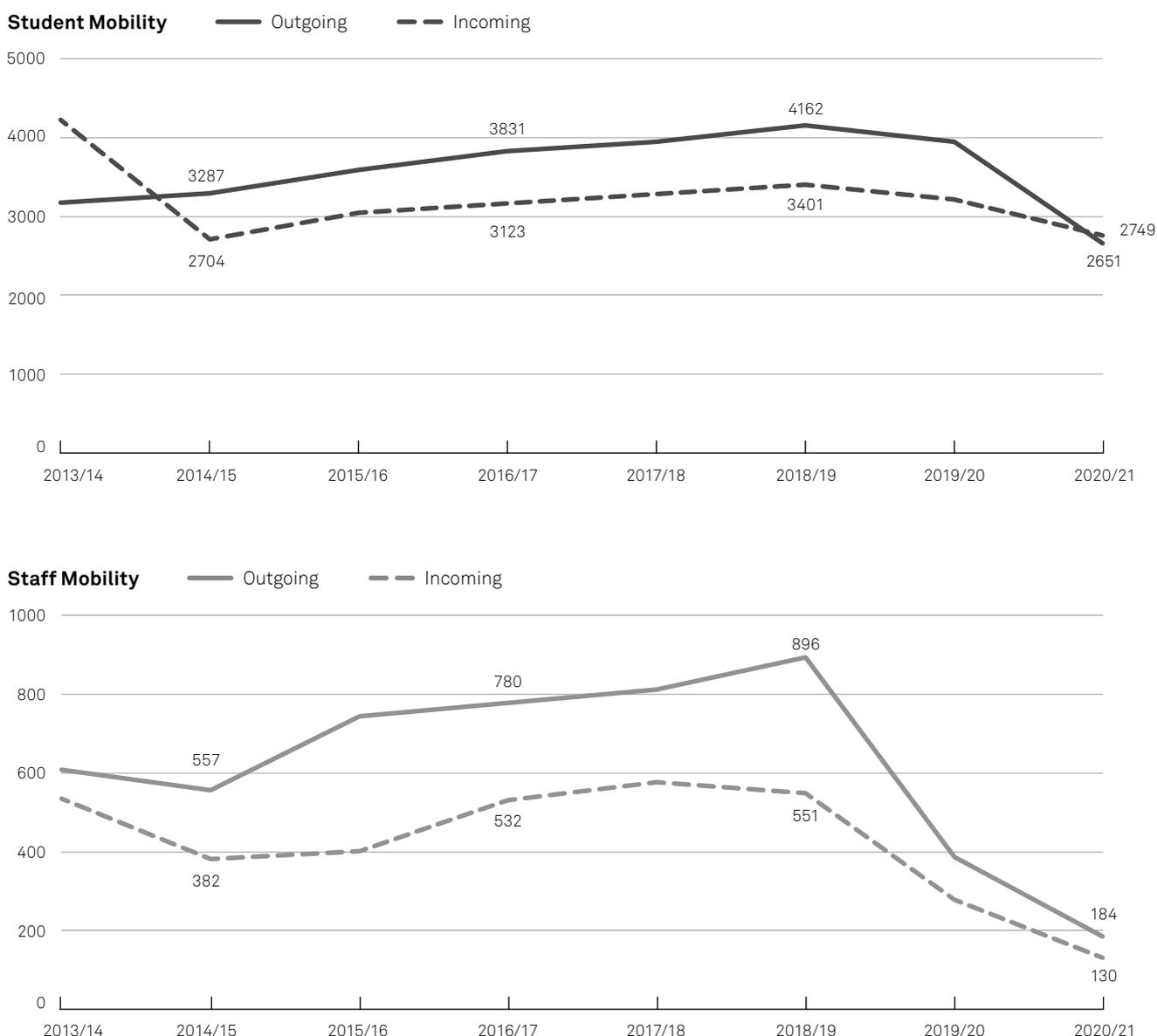
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# Stays abroad become more complicated but remain possible

The latest statistical figures show that the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting the mobility of students, lecturers and university staff alike and has an increasing impact on the development of mobility figures. Since the beginning of the pandemic, outgoing student mobility has fallen by 38% overall and incoming student mobility by 14%. Staff mobility has plummeted since the beginning of 2020: –81% outgoings and –76% incomings.<sup>1</sup> This development will continue as long as distance learning remains the rule at European higher education institutions<sup>2</sup> and travel restrictions are in place.



**Figure 1:** Development of SEMP mobilities since 2013. The pandemic began in the spring semester 2020 (the second half of the 2019/20 academic year), as of March 2021.

<sup>1</sup> The mean value is used as reference in cases where data on student mobility for studies and traineeships (or staff mobility for teaching and training) is given combinedly.

<sup>2</sup> Higher education institutions are also referred to as «universities» in this publication.

New formats for virtual and blended mobility were quickly introduced in spring 2020 and enabled many students to continue and complete their exchange online. These alternatives to classic, physical mobility made it possible to maintain exchange activities even in times of crisis. In the long run however, they do not seem to be a viable option (yet). Only a very small number of students opt for exclusively virtual or for blended mobility formats; physical mobility is still clearly preferred.

Meanwhile, universities have to produce great efforts in order to maintain the remaining mobility activities while also managing the reorganisation brought along by the lockdown (home office, digital teaching, closed campus buildings). The pandemic is turning almost every exchange into a special case, and despite thorough preliminary discussions and individualised solutions, the uncertainties inherent to the current situation often lead to cancellations.

The present monitoring takes a closer look at the situation and provides information on the pandemic's impact on European mobility. Worldwide student mobility which is offered and funded by most Swiss institutions, also was and still is severely restricted by the pandemic, but is not part of this analysis.

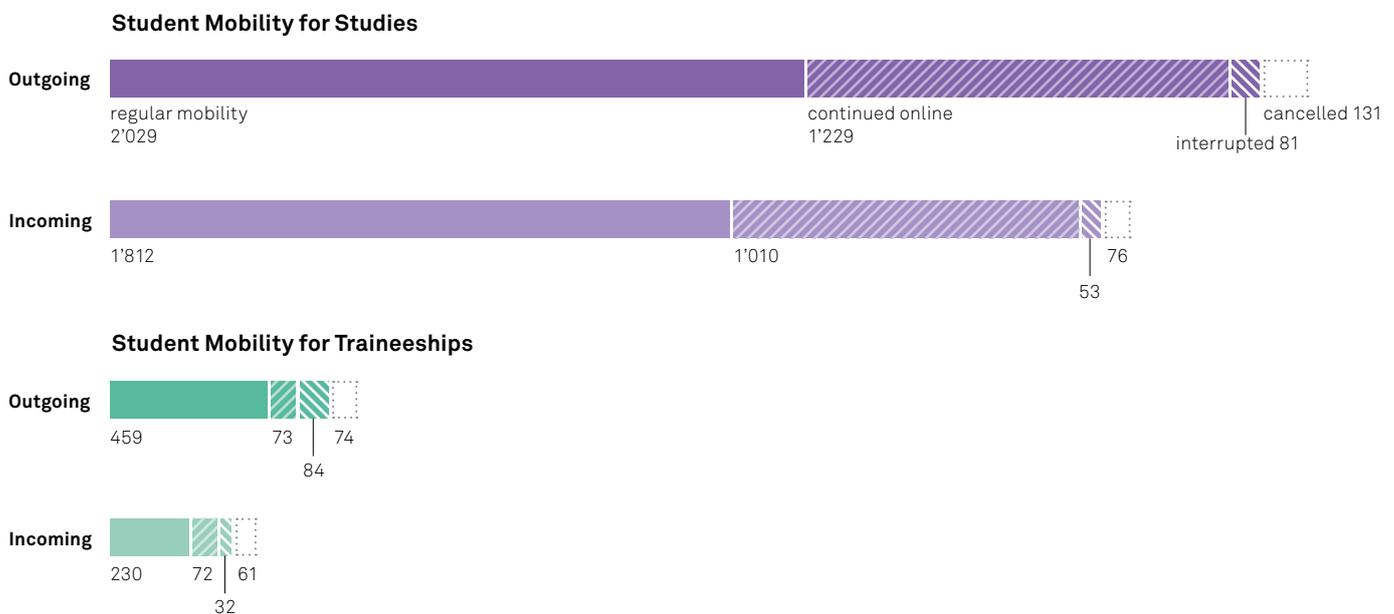
**Due to the pandemic, mobility management has become more complex and last minute cancellations more likely.**

**Regarding the data situation:** In addition to the institutions' usual reporting, Movetia conducted a survey in spring 2021. The institutions indicated how many of their reported SEMP mobilities of the academic year 2020/21 took place physically, virtually or in a blended format. In addition, they were asked how many mobilities could not be realised due to the pandemic, although they were originally planned. Five SEMP institutions were not able to break down their reported figures into the different mobility formats. Some of the survey data sent in was also incomplete, which is why the graphs and evaluations present gaps. No precise data is available on worldwide mobility because these activities are not implemented as part of a national programme.

# A rapid response to the pandemic: new mobility formats

The pandemic outbreak coincided with the start of the 2020 spring semester. The lockdowns in Switzerland and Europe also affected higher education with interruptions in on-campus teaching and a subsequent change to distance learning. Due to strict travel restrictions and border closures, mobility activities were temporarily halted.

In order to enable mobility in this context, the Swiss-European Mobility Programme SEMP was made more flexible for students. This means that a mobility could be carried out in one of the following ways: in the host country with on-site and/or distance learning, exclusively online with no distinction as to where the person was located, or in a blended format offering only a shortened stay abroad. This made it possible to adapt planned stays as well as exchanges that had already started and to react according to the new the situation.



**Figure 2:** Mobility formats, mobility for studying and for traineeships, outgoing and incoming, academic year 2019/20.

Those new formats worked well as short-term measures and enabled students to continue their exchange activities during the 2020 spring semester. The decline in student mobility for studies therefore remains relatively low, at -4% outgoing and -3% incoming compared to the autumn semester. Traineeships declined more sharply by -18% outgoing and -22% incoming.

The trends observed in Switzerland are confirmed by survey data from the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA). In spring 2021, ACA surveyed students receiving European grants about their exchange experience. The interviewed students mention «health related precautions/safety» and the «Chance to have any type of international experience when physical mobility is not possible» as the greatest advantages offered by the newly introduced adapted mobility formats. Nevertheless, almost half of the respondents also think that interest in the virtual and blended formats will decrease again in the future. Just under 20% each estimate that interest will remain the same or that they cannot judge it, and only 15% think that it will increase.<sup>3</sup>

### **Staff mobility at a standstill**

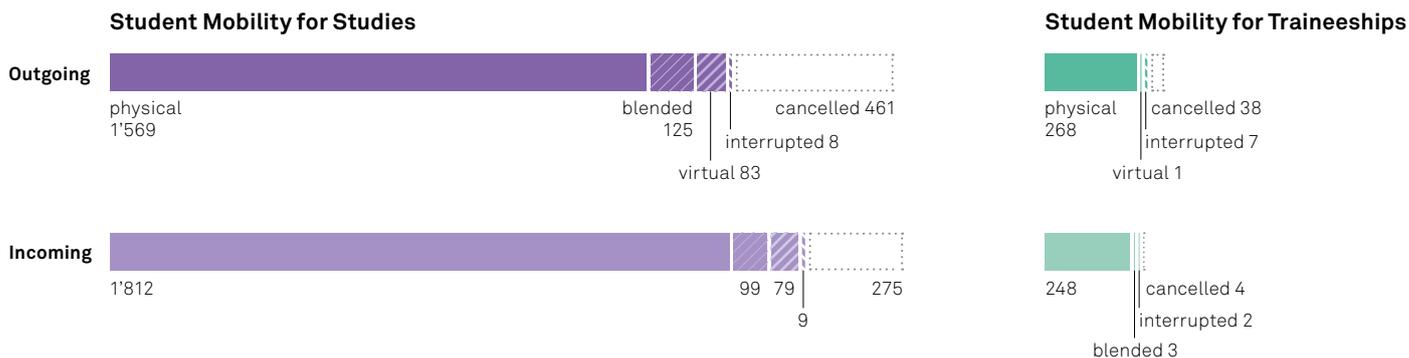
Staff mobility for teaching and for training purposes has almost come to a complete halt since the beginning of the pandemic. The introduction of new mobility formats is more complex in this area because mobility programmes, both for students and for staff, follow the basic principle of covering additional costs incurred abroad. Due to the change to distance learning, the possibility of teaching on-site at foreign universities is no longer available. Staff exchanges are often short stays, and they now take place exclusively online. Therefore, they do not qualify for funding by Movetia.

**The new mobility formats introduced at the beginning of the pandemic worked well as short-term solutions. A year later however, they are no longer attractive.**

<sup>3</sup> ACA snapshot survey «Students' Motivations for Blended and Virtual Mobilities», June 2021 (publication upcoming).  
Note: The mobility formats offered by SEMP and Erasmus+ are identical.

# Stays in the host country still widely preferred – despite distance learning

While during the academic year 2019/20 only one semester was affected by the pandemic, the year 2020/21 sees both the autumn and spring semesters overshadowed by the pandemic. And it isn't over yet: the semester starting this September will be the fourth in a row in which the mobility opportunities for the entire target group will be impacted by the coronavirus.



**Figure 3:** Physical, blended and virtual mobilities as well as terminations and cancellations for the academic year 2020/21. Student mobilities for studying and for internship, outgoing and incoming, as of March 2021.

Students tend to either embark on a physical mobility or not go at all. With 88% of outgoing students and 91% of incoming students, the vast majority still travels to the host country to attend classes, despite ongoing distance learning in most countries. The virtual or blended mobility formats seem to be less attractive: only 5% (virtual) and 7% (blended) of outgoing students choose these alternatives for a semester abroad, and even fewer do so for internships. As opposed to the previous year, virtual mobility in the academic year 2020/21 means following online courses from your own country (without travelling to the host country). Although there are options for virtual or blended mobility, the number of cancellations is strikingly high among both outgoing and incoming students.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A mobility is deemed cancelled if it has been planned, documented and prepared but could not take place after all, for example due to complicated travel regulations or too much general uncertainty.

### **Declines intensify – Switzerland remains attractive**

In the current academic year 2020/21, declines in student mobility are more important than during the previous year. However, incoming mobility to Switzerland (-1%) is holding up better than outgoing mobility from Switzerland to other countries (-30%). This can be explained by the great efforts made by Swiss higher education institutions to maintain mobility and by their attractiveness as destinations. Except for three (smaller) SEMP institutions, they all report having remained open to exchange students throughout the pandemic period. It is also clear from the responses that more foreign students than usual opt for a stay in Switzerland, even though distance learning was also in place here. Less strict lockdown measures than in other European countries may have had an impact on this choice.

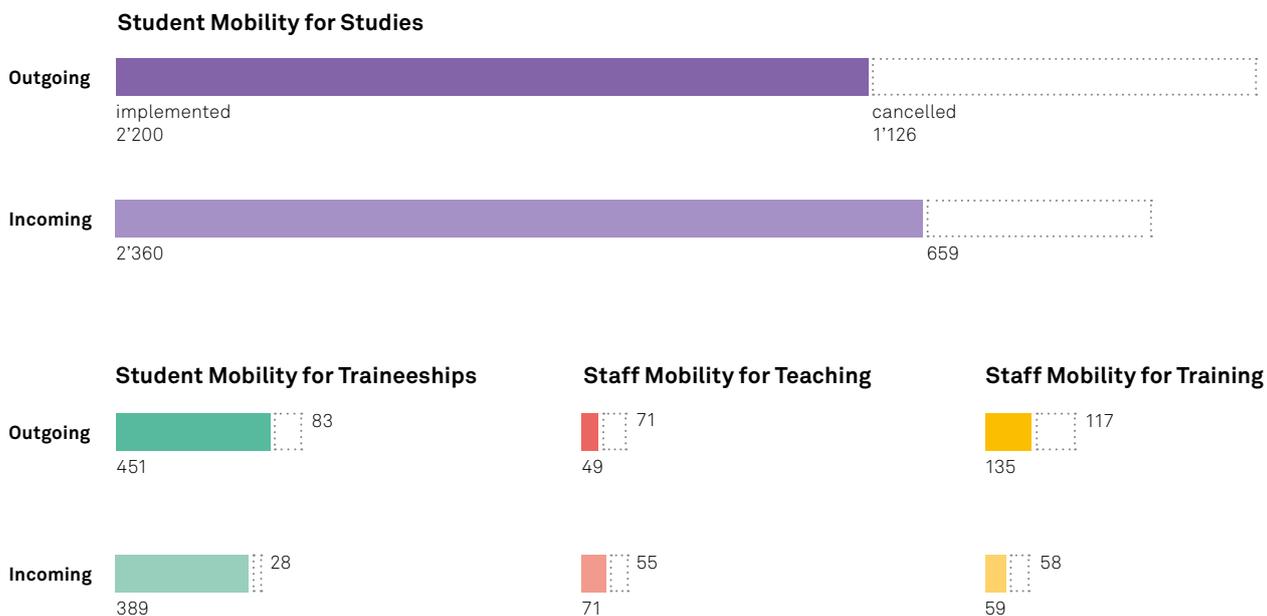
**Switzerland is a popular destination in times of pandemic and incoming mobilities are holding up better than outgoing ones.**

# Lasting pandemic puts mobility under increasing pressure

The workload for educational institutions in general has increased significantly since the spring semester 2020. With the pandemic situation and the introduction of more flexible mobility formats, the need for individual support has increased. Students who were already abroad sometimes had to return and be reintegrated to their own institution, the recognition of their ECTS had to be specifically checked and the communication of a lot of additional information was required at a very individual level. In addition, there have been institutional changes due to the nationwide lockdown, such as the closure of offices on site, the transition into home office, etc.

## Consequences for higher education institutions

The high cancellation rate of the past semesters means a lot of effort and little return for everyone. The consequences are particularly noticeable for higher education institutions. Generally, the promotion, preparation and management of mobility activities takes up a lot of resources. With the pandemic, the institutions were still required to perform this work and, in addition, they had to offer their students very specific advice, tailored to each situation. All these tasks were performed with the risk of seeing planned mobilities being cancelled, be it early or late in the process, and whilst getting less contributions towards the organisation of mobility.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 4:** Implemented and cancelled mobilities in the academic year 2020/21. Student and staff mobility, outgoing and incoming, as of March 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Institutions receive organisational support (OS) for each mobility reported to Movetia and carried out in accordance with the programme regulations. The funds allocated flow into the human resources and promotional measures of institutions.

## **Significant losses, but great potential**

On the part of the students, the interest in an experience abroad remains strong. They are keen to invest in their professional and personal skills and look into exchange possibilities. University staff also remain interested in mobility for teaching or in further training programmes. This is shown by the «lost» mobilities.<sup>6</sup>

Placing those cancelled mobilities in relation to the implemented stays abroad makes the consequences of the pandemic visible. Without the pandemic, the outgoing student mobility figures would be a whole 35% higher in the academic year 2020/21. The incoming mobility would be up 18%.

Compared to the pre-pandemic level (academic year 2018/19), the Swiss-European Mobility Programme still has to accept large losses. Student mobility remains significantly lower at –38% outgoing and –14% incoming. However, if the pandemic-related cancellations are added to the count, the values are close to the pre-pandemic level. Considering the usual yearly increase in mobility numbers, there is reason to assume that without the pandemic, the numbers would even be significantly higher. This analysis allows an optimistic projection for the future: mobility numbers will rebound and even increase further.

<sup>6</sup> «Lost» mobilities are stays abroad that were planned but cancelled as well as mobilities which were/had to be cancelled early in the process.

# Stays abroad are more important than ever

Even during the pandemic, stays abroad took place, albeit in a different way than usual: still mainly implying a physical stay in the host country, but using distance learning. Students are demonstrating their flexibility and are willing to go abroad even in difficult circumstances, adding a mobility experience to their education and their personal development. Students share inspiring examples of a «different» kind of exchange in times of pandemic.



«It's not like I spend my time locked in my room following classes online. No, my stay is going really well. The situation is complicated everywhere, so we might as well focus on the positive!»

**Sonia Buonanno** from the University of Pescara (IT), student of speech and language therapy, spent a semester at the University of Neuchâtel (spring 2020). Photo: Muriel Antille, text via Virginie Giroud (ArInfo, 15.2.2021).

The pandemic has made mobility for higher education institutions complex to plan and implement. There is still the risk that planned mobilities finally cannot take place. On the other hand, the pandemic also opened up opportunities for testing new mobility formats and gave digitised teaching a huge boost. Currently, exclusively virtual or even blended formats for mobility or international cooperation remain underused. It is now time to assess and improve this offer: instead of being used only as temporary solutions, virtual international exchanges should be developed further, for example by embedding them in study programmes. If the quality of digitised teaching increases, more students overall will benefit from a global education, enriched by an international and intercultural component.



«An intercultural exchange, no matter what form it takes, offers you the opportunity to get to know people from another culture, to identify with cultural aspects and to find common ground. I think everyone should be given this opportunity to broaden their horizon.»

**Selina Stoller**, student of Public Management and Policy, University of Bern and Lausanne, has also participated in youth exchanges. Photo: Selina Stoller

The pandemic also sheds light on something else: Intercultural and social skills as well as critical and networked thinking for problem solving have been among the «skills of the future» for years and are sought after by employers. The pandemic has added new requirements: Self-management, active learning, resilience, stress tolerance and a high degree of flexibility. All these skills can be acquired and strengthened during a stay abroad. Be it for studying or for an internship: international mobility is educational in many ways and should be part of every curriculum.