



Assessing the Housing Challenges of International Students: A Collaborative Approach with ESU and ESN



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Introduction

International student mobility has become an integral part of the globalised education landscape. However, this mobility is often accompanied by challenges related to housing and integration. This working paper from **UNICA (Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe)** aims to shed light on the housing challenges faced by international students, particularly the lack of resources available to International Relations Officers (IROs) to address these issues effectively. Housing for international students has emerged as a critical priority, integral to ensuring quality education and presenting challenges for both exchange and degree mobility students. The **UNICA International Relations Working Group**, in collaboration with the **European Student Union (ESU)** and the **European Student Network (ESN)**, delves into this issue to address the lack of resources available to International Relations Officers (IROs) in managing housing-related concerns.

Background

The decision by UNICA to prioritize the issue of student housing for international students stems from a growing recognition of the critical role housing plays in shaping the overall student experience. Traditionally, IROs who primarily focused on academic matters, find themselves increasingly entangled in housing-related issues. This shift in responsibilities reflects the urgency of the matter, as it directly impacts institutional internationalisation plans, influencing both outgoing and incoming student numbers.

The **European Student Union (ESU)** and the **Erasmus Student Network (ESN)** have independently identified housing as a key barrier to mobility. This common recognition underscores the widespread nature of the problem and the need for collaborative efforts to address it comprehensively. Housing challenges not only impede the academic pursuits



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of international students but also have broader implications for the internationalization goals of universities.

The 2009 student mobility target set by EU Education Ministers, which aimed for 20% of the European student population to engage in some form of mobility, has yet to be met. Even in 2024, a new Council Recommendation [Learning on the Move](#) was adopted, which increased the target to 23%, with a larger definition. The shortfall from meeting 20% is not merely a statistical concern; it reflects the real, tangible barriers that students face in their pursuit of international education experiences. The large and practical obstacle of accommodation has been identified as a significant hindrance to achieving this ambitious target. In addition, it is crucial to recognise that the issue is **both a supply and demand bottleneck**, as higher education institutions (HEIs) limit available places due to scarce accommodation, exacerbating problems like heightened criticism of internationalisation impacting local housing markets in cities such as Amsterdam and Dublin, to highlight two.

The failure to meet the mobility target underscores the **persistent challenges associated with student housing**. As long as these barriers, particularly the accommodation challenge, remain unaddressed, the mobility target will continue to elude realisation. UNICA recognises the urgency of confronting these issues head-on to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students, thereby fostering the mobility that is essential for enriching educational experiences and promoting cross-cultural understanding. By focusing on student housing, UNICA aims to drive collective action, bringing together universities, policymakers, and student organisations to tackle this crucial aspect of international education.

To effectively tackle the challenges associated with housing international students, it is imperative to delve into the specific reasons behind these difficulties and address them systematically. The **multifaceted nature of housing issues** necessitates a thorough examination of factors such as **limited availability, rising rental costs, discriminations,**



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quality of housing, and inadequate support structures. UNICA recognises that merely acknowledging the existence of these challenges is insufficient; a comprehensive understanding of their root causes is essential for implementing targeted solutions. By identifying and addressing these underlying issues, UNICA aims to create an environment where international students can secure suitable, qualitative and affordable accommodation without facing the formidable obstacles that have hindered their experiences thus far. This strategic approach aligns with UNICA's commitment to fostering an inclusive and supportive educational landscape, contributing to the realisation of internationalisation goals and the attainment of mobility targets set by the European community.

Recommendations and Findings

At the meeting between the UNICA International Relations Officers Working Group and the European Student Union (ESU) and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) held at **Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski**, pivotal insights were unveiled through the presentation of findings from a joint survey on housing. The survey, a collective effort by ESN and ESU, **amassed responses from over 8000 students across 15 countries**, offering a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by international students in securing suitable accommodation.

The survey uncovered significant hurdles encountered by international students, revealing the multifaceted nature of their housing struggles. **Financial anxieties** emerged as a critical issue, as the **prohibitive cost of accommodation** strained student finances, posing a substantial **hindrance to academic immersion**.¹ Additionally, the **timing of housing confirmations** introduced uncertainty, contributing to heightened stress and anxiety among students. **The prevalence of scams** targeting international students, including fake

¹ For more specifics on how grants are not covering real costs, please see Erasmus4All project <https://www.up.pt/erasmus-for-all/>



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listings and rental scams, highlighted the **vulnerability of this demographic** in the housing market and requires more assistance and local knowledge from receiving institutions.

In response to these challenges, ESN and ESU presented specific recommendations for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to address housing issues at various stages of mobility. The recommendations were summarised as:

Before Mobility:

- Consider housing in inter-institutional agreements;
- Clarify responsibilities for housing information and provision;
- Support students in finding housing before their move.
- Make sure the proposed housing are decent

During Mobility:

- Set up peer-to-peer housing support systems;
- Promote internationalization in student dorms;
- Ensure upfront grant payments for deposit support;
- Prioritize measures to prevent scams.
- To combat discrimination, based on race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, on the access of housing

After Mobility:

- Set up database of housing recognised as not a scam
- Incorporate evaluation mechanisms for hosting institutions;
- Establish feedback systems for outgoing students;
- Analyse housing trends for ongoing support initiatives.

The subsequent discussion at the UNICA meeting culminated in key takeaways. The **pivotal role of housing in shaping the overall student experience was emphasised, with public**



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housing identified as crucial for enhancing mobility satisfaction. This underscored the urgent need for **increased investment and expansion of public housing options.** Furthermore, the discussion highlighted the **importance of clarity in delineating responsibilities and expectations between sending and hosting institutions,** acknowledging the potential frustration for both students and university staff when such clarity is lacking.²

The outcomes of the UNICA meeting and the joint survey advocate for a comprehensive approach to address housing challenges, transcending mere infrastructure improvements. The recommendations underscore the necessity for comprehensive support structures, measures to combat scams, and initiatives ensuring equal treatment for international students. By amalgamating these insights, UNICA, ESN, and ESU seek to instigate actionable strategies that pave the way for a more inclusive, supportive, and secure housing environment for international students across European universities.

Conclusion

UNICA Network's dedicated focus on the intricate challenges of international student housing emerges as a pivotal step towards fostering transformative change in the global education landscape. The resonating findings from the joint survey conducted by the European Student Union (ESU) and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) underscore the pressing hurdles faced by international students. The recommendations presented, spanning the entire spectrum of mobility from pre-departure to post-return, provide a pragmatic roadmap to address these challenges comprehensively. However, the realisation of these recommendations and the broader aspiration for meaningful and lasting changes require collaborative endeavours. HEIs, university networks, student representation, and public governance must unite in a shared commitment to create an inclusive and

² For more, see the 2024 Annual Working Plan of the Erasmus+ program, p.24 https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-09/eplus-awp-20240-C-2023-6157_en.pdf



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supportive environment for international students. Only through such collective efforts can the persistent barriers to European student mobility, particularly those related to housing, be effectively dismantled, thereby propelling universities towards achieving their mobility goals.

UNICA is currently developing a novel handbook titled '**Handbook on Assistance to International Offices for International Student Housing.**' This handbook aims to offer practical solutions to IROs and international offices to address housing-related issues faced by international students. It is compiled with real-world input from UNICA member international offices. The handbook is scheduled to be published in the fall of 2024.

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