

# Going abroad during the pandemic

**Study on the effects of the Covid-19  
pandemic on students' plans to go abroad  
and their experiences whilst abroad**

**30 July 2021**

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## Key findings and considerations

1. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, 42% of the students surveyed state that they intend to press ahead with their plans to go abroad during the academic year 2021-2022. One-third of the students surveyed say that they did originally have plans to spend time abroad during the academic year 2021-2022 but will not be going ahead with these plans due to the uncertainties caused by the pandemic.
2. The most significant reason for the students surveyed to take a gap year or spend time studying or doing an internship abroad is to 'learn more about other cultures and yourself'. In that respect, those students who have spent the past year abroad have demonstrated that it is perfectly possible to work on one's self-development in the middle of a pandemic, stating that they have become more self-sufficient, self-confident and self-aware.
3. A majority of students who have plans to study abroad during the coming academic year will only go for a part of their programme. Gap years, full programmes and internships abroad are less popular, as was the case in the 2020 survey.
4. Two-thirds of the students surveyed state that they have made changes to their plans to spend time abroad due to the pandemic. Travel restrictions and other coronavirus measures are cited as the most significant reasons for this. Furthermore, a quarter of the students surveyed changed their destination, often in favour of one closer to home than originally planned. Hence, destinations within the European Economic Area (EEA) were more popular for the academic year 2021-2022 than they usually are. In contrast to last year's report, fewer students have chosen to travel to Asia this year.
5. Feeling safe is the most cited factor in students' choice of country. Feeling safe is rated above quality of education or appeal of student life at the destination.
6. Almost two-thirds of the students surveyed who had plans to go abroad say that they applied or intend to apply for a grant this year. Just one-third of respondents applied for a grant last year, at the start of the Covid-19 crisis in the Netherlands. It is impossible to say whether this is a direct consequence of the pandemic, but the drop in availability of parttime jobs as a result of the crisis might explain the considerable demand for grants.
7. More than a quarter of all the students surveyed take a positive view of online forms of teaching as a substitute for actual experiences abroad. Online internships, exchanges and international collaborative projects complement the curriculum whilst also giving all students the opportunity to (further) develop their international competencies and intercultural skills.

## Introduction

The world has been in and out of lockdown for nearly a year. Many students saw their plans to spend a period abroad fall through due to the pandemic. A gap year, studying or doing an internship abroad seemed less viable than ever. Or did it?

Although most Dutch educational establishments were forced to tell their students that, for the time being, it would not be possible for them to go ahead with their plans to study or do an internship or exchange abroad, efforts were immediately made to look for alternatives so that students could still gain some international experience.

There was plenty of online collaboration with foreign educational institutions, and some students even started their study programmes or internships abroad from home. This enabled them to work on their international competencies despite the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> They will need these competencies to help them solve global challenges in our intercultural society and in an internationally oriented job market.

Nevertheless, there were also students who did acquire these international competencies abroad in person. They did not allow themselves to be held back by the pandemic and jumped on a train or plane to pursue their plans abroad.

In order to investigate whether the coronavirus will affect students' plans to spend time abroad in the coming academic year (2021-2022), we conducted a questionnaire and held interviews among Dutch students. We also studied the impact of the pandemic on the experiences of those students who did still decide to go abroad (in a literal sense or online) during the past academic year (2020-2021). The results of the questionnaire and interviews are set out in this report.

The aim of this report is to provide a greater degree of insight among institutions of Dutch higher education and vocational education and training (VET) colleges on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on Dutch students' plans to spend time abroad during the academic year 2021-2022. It follows on from the 2020 report '**Will students still be going abroad in 2020-21?**' and supplements our recent **publication** on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on inbound student mobility for the academic year 2021-2022.

The present report comprises:

- an outline of trends in outbound student and other mobility for the purposes of a gap year, studying or doing an internship abroad;
- the results of the questionnaire 'What impact has COVID-19 had on Dutch students' plans to gain international experience?';
- the results of the interviews held with Dutch students who did study or do an internship abroad during the pandemic as well as with students who had to cancel their plans to go abroad due to the pandemic;
- our conclusion and recommendations.

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1) Please see the following infographic on Nuffic's website for an overview of what international competencies are and what purposes they serve: <https://www.nuffic.nl/sites/default/files/2020-08/model-internationale-competenties.pdf>

## Previous report

This is the second report that we have issued on the impact of the coronavirus on outbound student mobility in higher education and vocational education and training in the Netherlands. Now that more than a year has passed since the outbreak of the coronavirus and Dutch students have become more accustomed to the coronavirus pandemic and associated travel restrictions, this report aims to shed light on the reasons and factors underlying students' decisions on whether or not to press ahead with plans to take a gap year, study, or do an internship abroad. As such, this report focuses on those students who had or still have plans for the coming academic year and those students who nevertheless decided to press ahead with their plans to go abroad over the past academic year.

The report will also compare and contrast the situation of this year with that of last year. In order to do so, we asked a number of questions from last year and adapted them to the current situation. Unfortunately, differences between the questions and distribution of respondents across education sectors this year and last year meant we were unable to statistically compare the two years. Instead, we will mention last year's percentages where relevant, for the sake of comparison.

Three of the most important findings from the 2020 report are given below:

1. The majority of respondents were still as enthusiastic about the idea of gaining international experience as they were before the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. Almost three-quarters of respondents indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant or very significant impact on their plans to go abroad.
3. A third of respondents postponed their plans to go abroad.

## Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the present study, namely a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. A description of our approach is given below.

The results of the questionnaire are presented in **Section B** of this report. The results of the interviews are set out in **Section C**.

### Questionnaire

#### *Dissemination*

We used a variety of channels and means to disseminate the questionnaire for the second study in May 2021. We reached out to Dutch students through various social media and other channels with the aid of institutions of Dutch higher education and student organisations such as Netherlands Worldwide Students (NWS). The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions and was open between 27 May and 14 June.

#### *Respondents*

This report discusses students' plans to spend time abroad. In addition to students enrolled at an institution of Dutch higher education or a VET college, this study included respondents who have just passed their final exams, as well as respondents who are between the bachelor's and master's phases.

A total of 799 respondents took part in the quantitative component. We differentiate between three groups of respondents:

- group 1: 338 students who have plans to go abroad for the academic year 2021-2022.
- group 2: 244 students who had plans to go abroad for the academic year 2021-2022, but no longer have plans to do so;
- group 3: 217 students who do not or did not have any plans to go abroad for the academic year 2021-2022 and do not yet know whether they intend to enrol.

We asked all respondents about the factors that make a country appealing and about their reasons for wishing to go abroad. We also asked whether the pandemic has affected their views on gaining experience abroad and about the extent to which they would be interested in forms of education and other options that would enable them to acquire international experience without actually leaving the Netherlands.

We also asked the 338 students (group 1) who have plans to go abroad:

- why they want to go abroad, when and to where;
- whether they have applied for a grant or will be doing so, and if so, which grant.
- In addition, we asked group 1 (338 students) and group 2 (244 students) about the following: the factors that are influencing (or have influenced) their plans to go abroad;
- whether their plans to go abroad have changed due to the pandemic;
- whether they opted to go to a different country due to the pandemic, and if so, which country;
- whether they have incurred a study completion delay due to cancelling, postponing or prematurely terminating their time abroad.

The number of respondents who answered a question (N number) will be given for all results cited in this report. Given that some respondents skipped questions or did not complete the questionnaire, the N number can vary and differ from the total number of respondents per group.

#### *Distribution across education sectors*

Of the respondents who filled in the questionnaire, 43% are studying at a university, 21% at an institution of Dutch higher education and 15% in vocational education and training. Another 20% of the respondents are school pupils about to complete secondary education. The other 1% are not yet currently studying but intend to do so.

#### *Interviews*

The semi-structured interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and were recorded with the participants' consent. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes.

#### *Recruitment*

In order to recruit participants for the qualitative interviews, we approached our contacts within institutions of Dutch higher education, vocational education and training and secondary education. We also asked student organisations such as Netherlands Worldwide Students (NWS) to spread the word and reached out to Dutch students through various social media and other channels.

## Participants

A total of 21 students in Dutch higher education were interviewed. These students did not participate in the quantitative part of this study. Of the participants, 14 are studying at a university of applied sciences and 7 are studying at a university. We also endeavoured to reach vocational education and training students when recruiting interview participants. Unfortunately, the response rate from vocational education and training was so low that we decided not to include this group in the qualitative part of the study.

Information on the 21 higher education students interviewed:

- 13 students were abroad during the coronavirus pandemic in the academic year 2020-2021.
- Of these 13 students, 9 did an internship, 3 studied a full master's degree and 1 did a minor abroad.
- Out of the 13 students, 9 started their experience abroad during the pandemic, with the rest starting prior to the global outbreak of the coronavirus.
- 10 of the destination countries were within the European Economic Area (EEA). 9 out of the 13 participants had previously studied or done an internship abroad.
- Out of the 21 interview participants, 8 had to cancel their plans to go abroad due to the pandemic. This group included six students who were intending to go abroad to study and two students who were intending to go abroad for an internship. Five out of the eight had planned to go to a destination outside of the EEA, and four students had been abroad to study or to do an internship at least once in the past.

The results for those students who did go abroad during the past academic year are presented in **Section C** of this report. The quantitative results in **Section B** will be supported by quotes from the eight interviewed students who ended up having to cancel their plans to go abroad due to the coronavirus pandemic.

### **This report discusses the following types of student mobility:**

Credit mobility is a form of mobility that allows students to complete certain components of their study programme abroad, such as exchanges, minors and internships.

Diploma mobility is a form of mobility that allows students to pursue an entire bachelor's or master's programme abroad.

A gap year abroad can serve various purposes, such as travel or volunteer work. This form of student mobility is not tied to the accumulation of credits.

## A. Trends in outbound (student) mobility

Compared to students from other European countries, Dutch students are more likely to take a gap year abroad or do part of their studies or an internship abroad. Students cite meeting people from other cultures, learning another language, and the opportunity to settle in another country as the most important reasons for wishing to go abroad.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, prior to the coronavirus pandemic, we saw a steady increase in the number of Dutch students taking a gap year abroad or studying or doing an internship abroad. It was particularly common for Dutch students in higher education to go abroad for part of their studies, due to credit mobility. This was also evident from the rising number of students heading abroad on an Erasmus+ grant.<sup>3</sup> The Netherlands was rated above the European average on credit mobility during the years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Within vocational education and training, outbound student mobility is traditionally less popular than it is in higher education. Vocational education and training students who go abroad are most likely to do so for an internship.<sup>5</sup>

There was also an increase in the number of higher education students heading abroad to complete a full bachelor's or master's programme (also known as diploma mobility).<sup>6</sup> That said, at 2% of the total number of Dutch students, the proportion of them participating in this form of mobility was still below the EU average (2.8%) and well below the OECD average of 5.9%.<sup>7</sup> Above all, this form of mobility was concentrated primarily on a few popular destinations such as Belgium and the UK, followed by the USA, Germany, and France. Whether the UK will manage to stay as popular with Dutch students remains to be seen. It is expected that stricter rules regarding visas as well as increased tuition fees will prove a barrier to Dutch students in higher professional education and vocational education and training who wish to undertake a full study programme or do an internship there.

In the years before the coronavirus pandemic, we saw the percentage of pupils taking a gap year after high school continue to gradually increase. Travel abroad during a gap year grew in popularity too. We also saw more students in academic education taking a gap year abroad than students in higher professional education. It is less common for vocational education and training students to take a gap year abroad. This is down to the fact that education is compulsory in the Netherlands until the age of 18, and most vocational education and training students are around 16 years of age when they start their programmes. It is expected that the barriers to travel, health risks, and other uncertain factors that have come into play in the past year will have an adverse effect on the number of students taking a gap year abroad. The pandemic has also impacted the work of organisations which supervise gap year students, for example those doing voluntary work in remote parts of the world.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the form it takes, outbound mobility remains a significant aspect of Dutch students' development of international competencies. During time abroad, students work on skills that are indispensable to graduates entering the job market. The Dutch government, educational institutions, various interest groups in education, and Nuffic have declared encouraging outbound student mobility a priority. Another goal is to make the international experience abroad accessible to each and every student.

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2) See [Erasmus+ higher education impact study - Publications Office of the EU \(europa.eu\)](#)

3) See [Erasmus+ higher education students mobility | Nuffic](#)

4) See [Internationalisering in beeld 2018 \[An Overview of Internationalisation 2018\] | Nuffic](#)

5) See [VET students abroad | Nuffic](#)

6) See [Dutch degree students abroad | Nuffic](#)

7) See [Internationaliseringsagenda Hoger Onderwijs 2018 \[Internationalisation Agenda for Higher Education 2018\]](#)

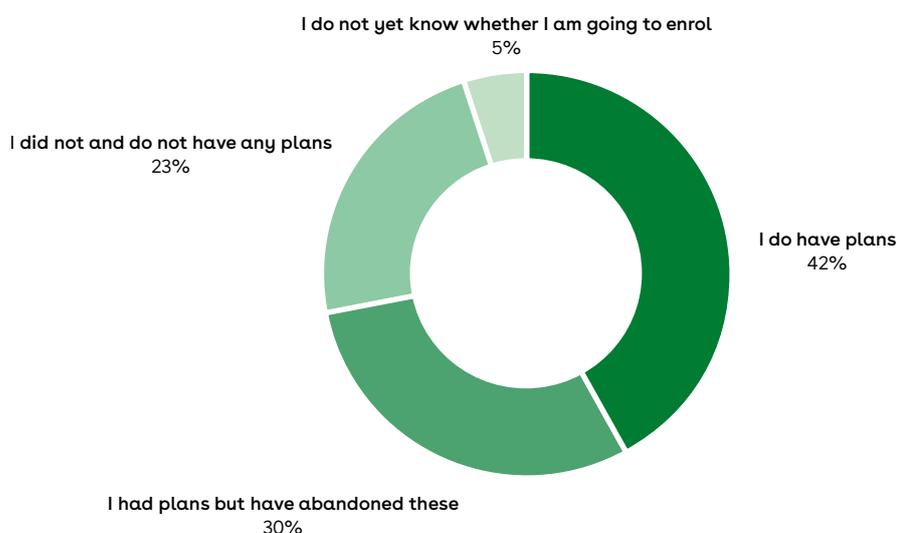
## B. Questionnaire results: 'What impact has COVID-19 had on Dutch students' plans to gain experience abroad in the academic year 2021-2022?'

In order to gauge the impact of the pandemic on students' plans to spend time abroad during the academic year 2021-2022, this section will focus on the nature of, and factors involved in Dutch students' plans to spend time abroad.

### Plans to go abroad

**Figure B1.** Response to the question:

*Do you or did you have any plans to take a gap year, study, or do an internship abroad during the academic year 2021-2022? (N=799)*



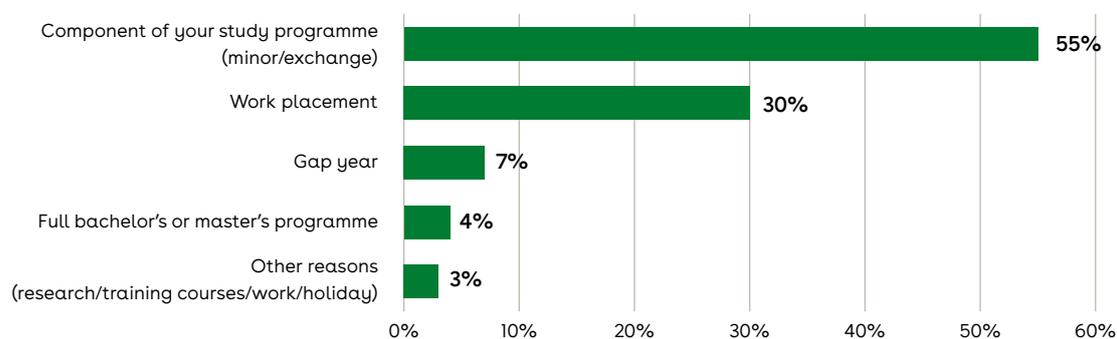
### 42% of the students surveyed plan to spend time abroad during the academic year 2021-2022

5% of the students surveyed were still unsure as to whether or not they would take a gap year, study, or do an internship abroad, and 23% said that they did not have any plans to go abroad at all. 30% of the students surveyed originally had plans, but no longer have any plans. A total of 72% of the students surveyed said that they plan or planned to take a gap year, study, or do an internship abroad. In the 2020 study this figure was 79%.

## Study programme, internship or gap year abroad

**Figure B2.** Response to the question:

Why are you planning to go abroad during the academic year 2021-2022? (N=315)



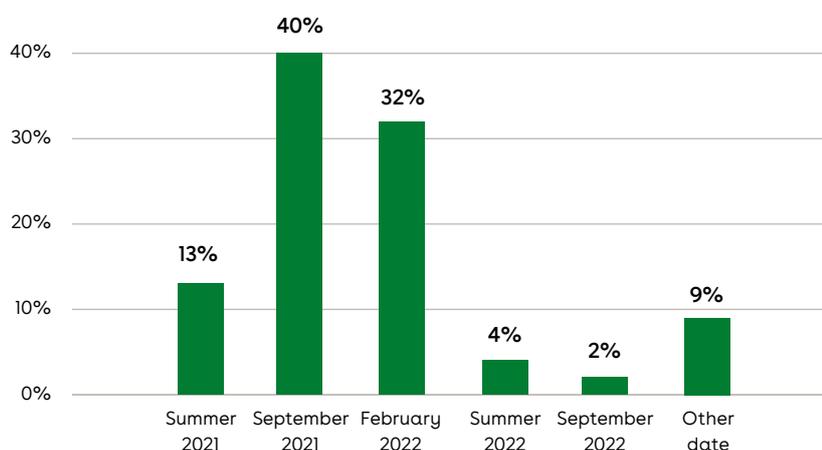
### Majority of respondents going abroad do so as part of their studies

Of those students who stated that they have plans to go abroad, 55% will be doing so as part of their studies, e.g., for a minor or an exchange programme. Last year this figure was 47%.

In addition, 30% of the respondents who answered this question are planning to go abroad for an internship. Furthermore, a small percentage intends to take a gap year abroad, undertake a full bachelor's or master's degree or go abroad for other reasons such as research, training courses, work, or holiday.

## Departure date

**Figure B3.** Response to the question: When do you plan to go abroad? (N=324)



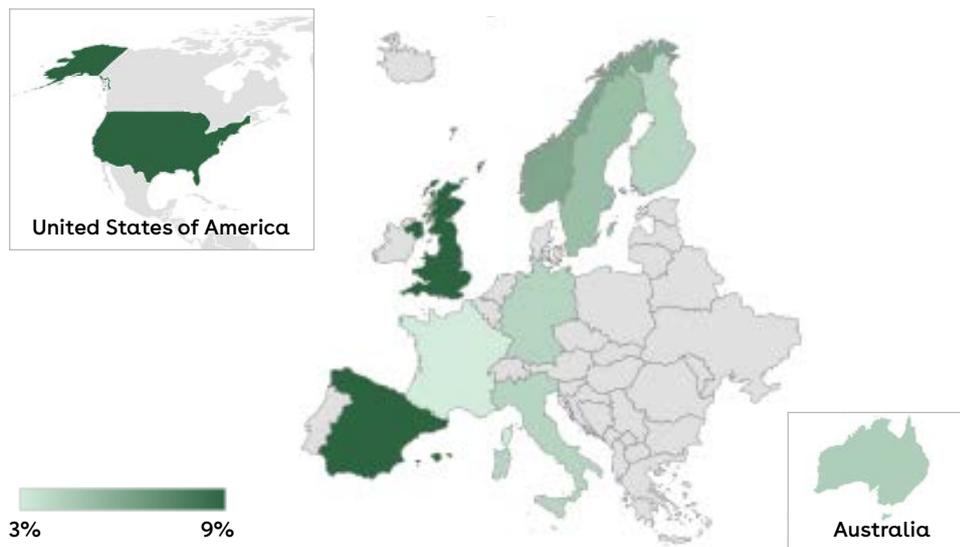
### September 2021 most popular time of departure

Of the students surveyed who intend to go abroad, the vast majority are planning to do so during the coming academic year. 40% wish to go abroad in September 2021. 32% say that they plan to leave in February 2022.

Moreover, 13% of the respondents hope to leave as early as summer 2021, before the new academic year begins.

## Destination

**Figure B4.** The most popular destinations for students intending to go abroad. (N=342)  
The darker the colour, the more popular the destination. Respondents could only select one option.

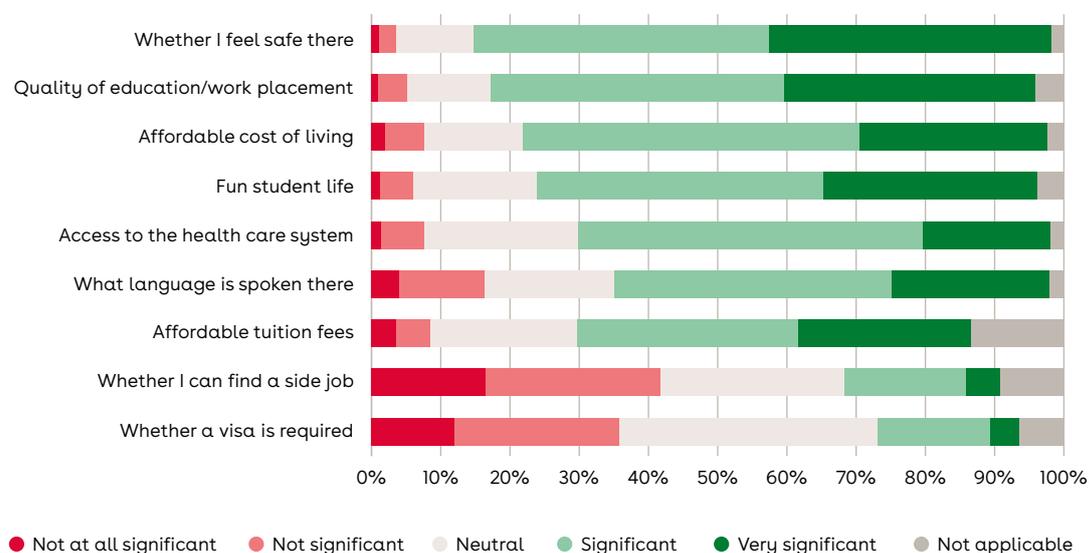


### The USA, Spain and the UK the most popular destinations

These three countries are the most popular among the respondents planning to go abroad, accounting for 10%, 9% and 9% respectively. Norway, Sweden, Australia, Italy, Finland, Germany and France are also popular. In total, more than half of this group of respondents (52%) intend to travel to a country in the EEA. Compared to last year, only a small proportion of these respondents intend to head to Asia to study or to do an internship. Last year, 23% of respondents planned to spend time in Asia, but this figure has dropped to 9% this year.

We asked all respondents what factors make a country an appealing destination in which to study or do an internship or participate in an exchange programme.

**Figure B5.** Response to the question:  
Which factors make a country an appealing destination for you? (N=443)



### Feeling safe the most significant factor when choosing a destination

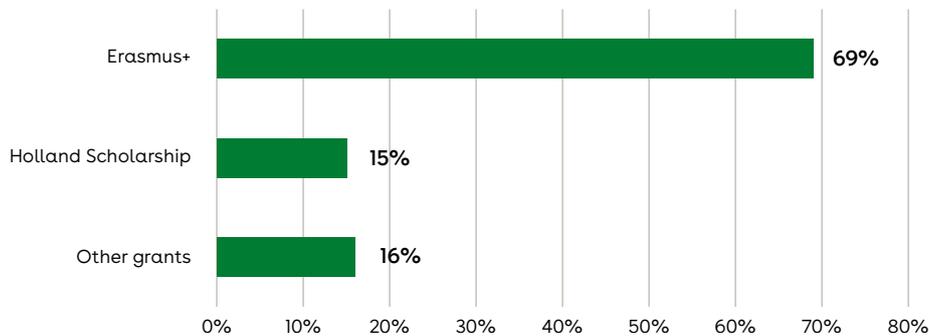
84% of all respondents to in this questionnaire say that feeling safe there is a significant or very significant factor when it comes to making a country an appealing destination. Quality of education and affordability of daily life are cited as significant factors by over three-quarters of respondents, with 79% and 76% choosing 'significant' or 'very significant' respectively. They also attach importance to student life being fun and to students having access to the health care system in the destination country. In addition, over half of the respondents say that the language spoken (63%) and the level of tuition fees (57%) are significant factors in a country's appeal.

**'Seeing American student life in films and series makes me want to be part of it.'**  
*Interview participant*

## Grants

**Figure B6.** Response to the question:

*Which grant did you apply for or do you intend to apply for? Multiple answers possible. (N=205).*

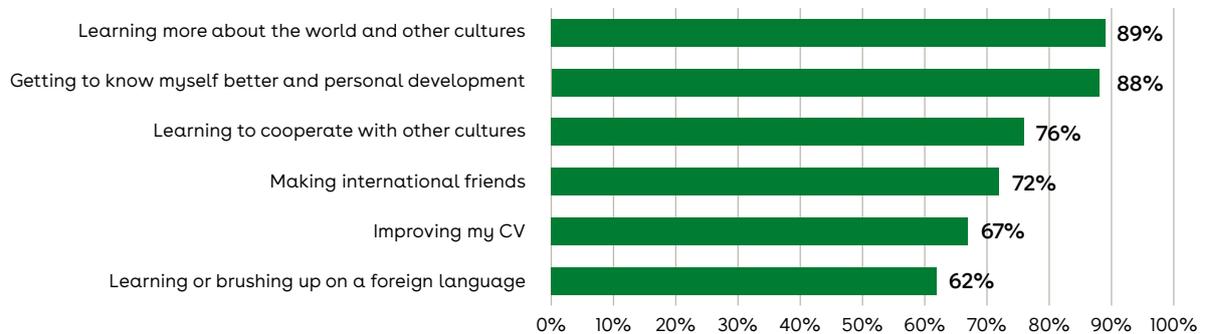


### Erasmus+ grant most applied for by respondents

Almost two-thirds of the students surveyed (63%) who have plans to go abroad say that they applied or intend to apply for a grant. This was 34% last year. Of the group of respondents who applied or intend to apply for a grant this year, 69% say that they are going for an Erasmus+ grant. Moreover, 15% of the respondents are applying for a Holland Scholarship grant, and 16% are applying for a different grant, such as the Cultureel Verdragbeurs, Sino-Dutch Scholarship or a grant from the VSB fund or the Education Executive Agency (DUO).

## Motivation

**Figure B7.** Response to the question: To what extent are the objectives below factors in your desire to go abroad? The percentage given for each objective below is a sum of the respondents who consider it to be a significant or very significant factor. (N=587).



### Most respondents go abroad to discover the world and other cultures

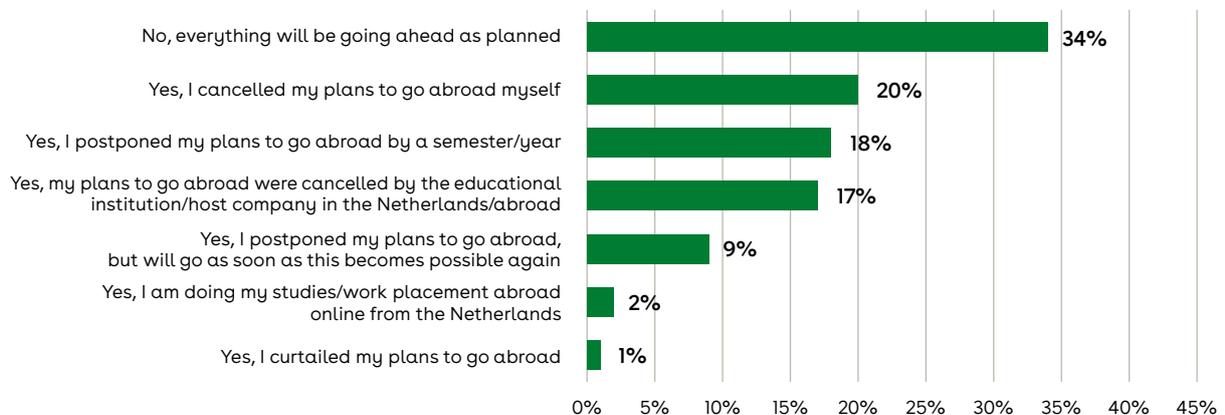
89% of all respondents state that 'learning more about the world and other cultures' is a significant or very significant factor in their desire to go abroad. Another significant factor often selected (88%) is 'getting to know myself better and developing'. Learning to work together with other cultures and forging international friendships were also rated highly by the respondents.

*'I love new experiences. You find yourself in a different environment, getting to know new cultures, new people, living on your own, just going on an adventure.'*  
Interview participant

## The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students' travel plans

### Changed plans

**Figure B8.** Response to the question: Have your plans to go abroad during the academic year 2021-2022 changed due to the coronavirus crisis? (N=369) One answer possible.



## The coronavirus pandemic is having a significant impact on students' plans to go abroad

Two-thirds of the respondents who have or had plans to go abroad say that their plans have changed in some respect. 20% of the students surveyed cancelled their plans to go abroad, and 17% had their plans cancelled by the educational institution.

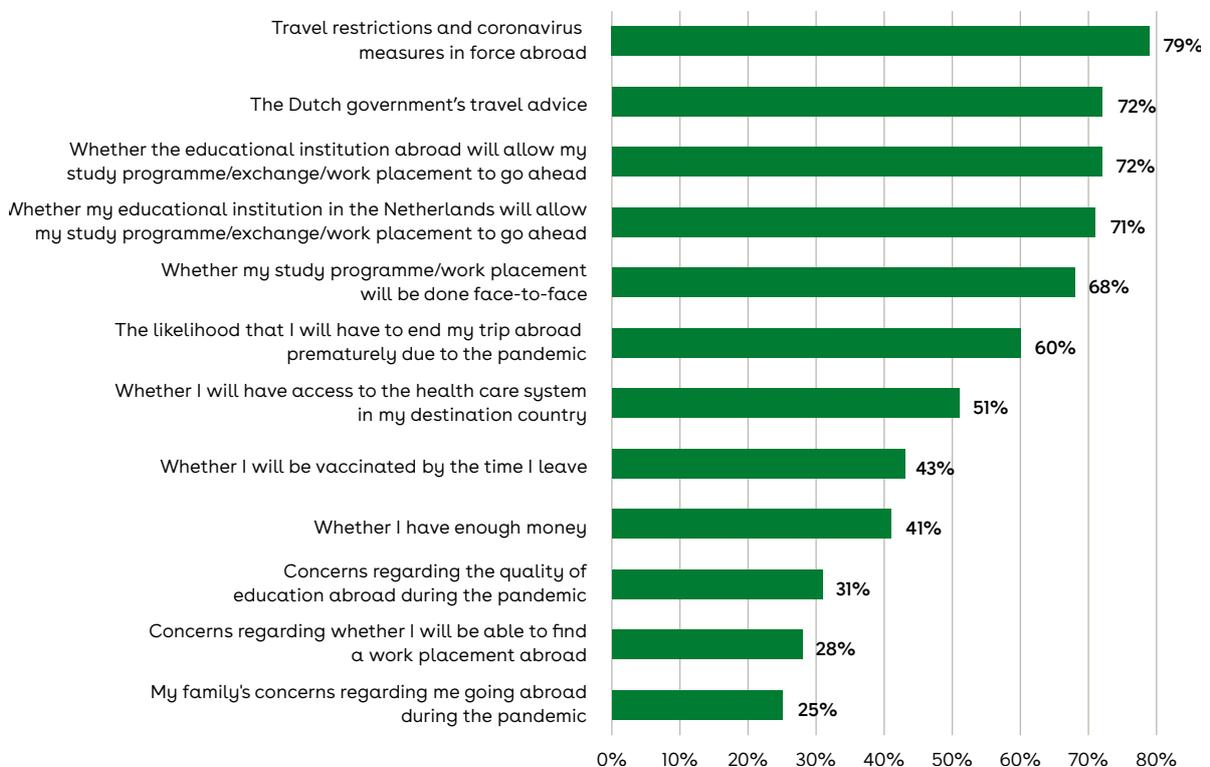
Nevertheless, 34% of the respondents state that their plans to go abroad remain unchanged. In addition, over a quarter of the students say that they still intend to go abroad, though they have postponed their plans. 18% say that they have put off their trip by one year, and 9% say they will go as soon as it is possible again. There is also a small group of students who say that their course or internship abroad will be conducted online from the Netherlands.

**'I've effectively lost a year because I'll be taking a gap year to increase my chances of being able to go to New Zealand in 2022.'** Interview participant

Of the group of respondents forced to cancel, postpone or prematurely end their time abroad, two-thirds say that they have not incurred a study completion delay. 22% of the students have incurred a delay of one semester or less. 12% feel that they have fallen behind by one year or more due to having to cancel, postpone or prematurely end their time abroad.

### Decisive factors

**Figure B9.** Response to the question: To what extent do/did the factors below influence your plans to go abroad? The percentage given for each factor below is a sum of the respondents who consider it to have a significant or very significant influence. (N=443).



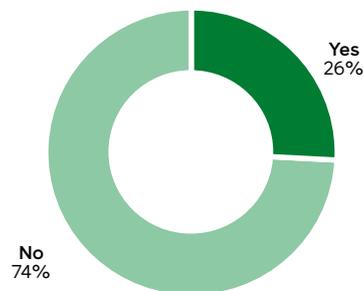
## Travel restrictions and coronavirus measures are having a significant impact on plans to go abroad during the coming academic year

As many as 79% of the respondents who have or had plans to go abroad consider the influence of these factors to be significant or very significant. Almost three-quarters of the students surveyed also cite the Dutch government's travel advice and the foreign educational institution's decision on whether or not to allow the course of study, exchange or internship to go ahead as significant factors. Factors such as financial concerns (41%) or being able to find an internship (28%) are cited markedly less often.

'Going against my school's wishes wasn't an option, as that would mean I wouldn't earn my credits.' Interview participant

### A different destination

**Figure B10.** Breakdown of respondents who did or did not change their destination due to the coronavirus pandemic. (N=311)

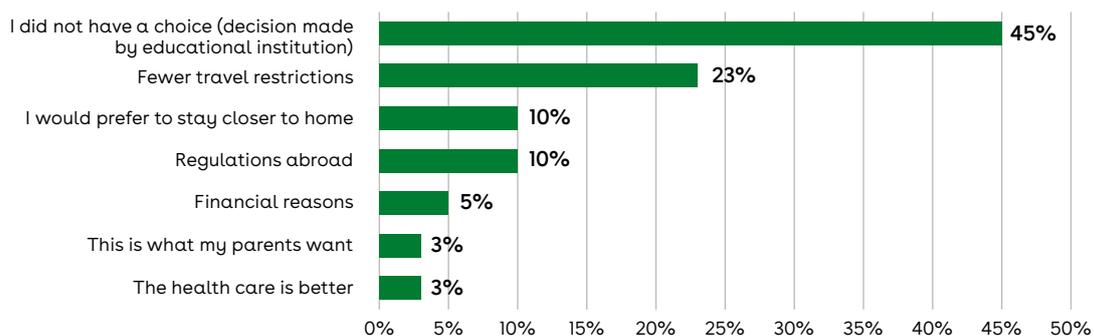


### A quarter of respondents who have or had plans to go abroad are choosing a different destination

Of this group, 69% said that they originally intended to go to a country outside of the European Economic Area (EEA), such as Australia, the USA or the UK. In the end, just 19% of them will be heading to a destination outside of the EEA. Most of them will remain in the Netherlands (54%) or switch to a destination in Europe such as Belgium or Germany.

Of the students who had to choose a different destination country, nearly half stated that this was not a free choice.

**Figure B11.** Response to the question: What is the most significant factor in changing your destination country? (N=77). One answer possible.



### Educational institutions decide for the student

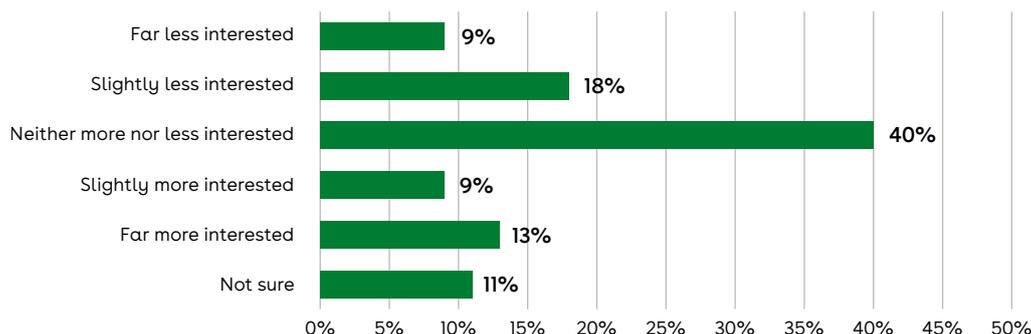
45% of the respondents could not go to the country that was their first choice due to travel restrictions or because the educational institution had not allowed it. 23% stated that they deliberately chose a country with fewer travel restrictions.

10% of the students also said that they would rather be a little bit closer to home during the pandemic. Local coronavirus restrictions were cited as the most important factor in choosing a different destination by 10% of respondents.

'The host company was very clear and made their decision promptly. The information provided by the school was pretty poor. It took ages before they were clear about what was and wasn't allowed. That's why I quickly decided to look for an alternative in the Netherlands.' *Interview participant*

### How do students currently view the prospect of gaining experience abroad?

**Figure B12.** Response to the question: Has the coronavirus influenced your desire to spend time abroad? (N=536) One answer possible.



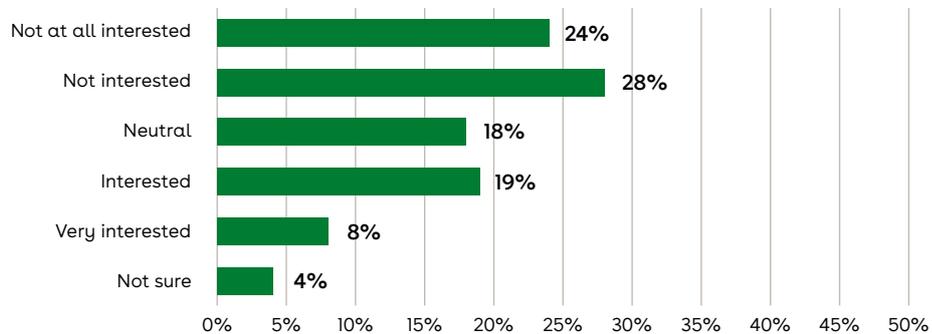
### There is still plenty of enthusiasm to go abroad

When asked whether the Covid-19 pandemic has influenced their desire to gain experience abroad, 40% of all students surveyed said that it has not. They are no more or less interested than they were before the pandemic. 27% state that they have become slightly less interested or far less interested. By contrast, 22% say that they are now slightly more interested or far more interested in gaining experience abroad.

In line with these results, the qualitative part of this study found that most of the interview participants whose plans had been cancelled would be interested in going abroad in the future.

## How do students feel about the alternatives?

**Figure B13.** Response to the question: To what extent would you be interested in different forms of education or other options that would enable you to gain international experience at home in the Netherlands? (N=536) One answer possible.



### More than a quarter positive about online forms of education

When the respondents were asked to what extent they would be interested in forms of education or other options that would enable them to gain international experience at home in the Netherlands, such as virtual international collaborative projects, online exchanges and internships, more than a quarter (27%) stated that they would be interested or very interested in such alternatives. By contrast, 52% said that they would not be interested or would not be interested at all.

## C. How has COVID-19 affected the experiences of Dutch students who have studied or done an internship abroad?

**Figuur C1.** Destinations of the interview participants who did go abroad during the coronavirus pandemic. (N =13)



## The decision to go

When asked about their decision to press ahead with their trip abroad despite the pandemic, slightly more than half of the students interviewed claimed never to have wavered in their intention to go abroad. One frequently cited reason was that going abroad seemed preferable to staying in 'locked down' Netherlands... Students also stated that they had expected the coronavirus situation to improve rapidly and that they found gaining experience abroad too valuable an opportunity to cancel.

**'I'd much rather go to a somewhat normal environment.'**

Those students who did waver in the beginning had various reasons for doing so: lingering doubts about whether or not they would be able to press ahead with their plans or complete their stay abroad, lockdowns interfering with the experience, or the possibility of a study completion delay. Nevertheless, without exception, the students feel that their decision to go abroad or to remain there was the right one.

## Travel advice

**'The university and my parents didn't like the fact that I stayed abroad, but I was pretty resolute. I'd just started my internship and wasn't going to give it up.'**

When deciding whether to go abroad, the students primarily considered the travel advice issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the policy of their own educational institution. Unsurprisingly, these tend to converge. Educational institutions would often prohibit travel to countries on the amber list, for instance. Even so, there was a degree of flexibility in the advice, with exceptions occasionally being made if, for example, the internship contract had already been signed or the student was already in the destination country. In other cases, students were actually asked to return to the Netherlands due to changed travel advice. Although travelling against the advice of the educational institution could have adverse consequences for the students (e.g., losing eligibility for insurance cover, grants, and other financial support), some decided to go or remain abroad regardless.

## Support from the educational institution

**'I really had to push and push every time I needed support, and then I'd eventually get a response.'**

There was considerable variation in the level of support that participants felt they received from their educational institutions. In some cases, additional support was provided in light of the pandemic, e.g., a weekly online check-in with a mentor.

**'The International Office (IO) got in touch with everyone who was abroad. Both the course staff and the IO were closely involved with them.'**

Other participants describe how it was left to them to keep in touch with their educational institution. Some positive anecdotes stood out, such as the practical support offered by a particular internship supervisor or student counsellor on site, including help with doing shopping, arranging coronavirus tests or giving lifts to and from the internship.

## Online versus face-to-face teaching

**'Some of my modules were taught by teaching staff who didn't ever appear on the screen. I wouldn't recognise them if they passed me on the street.'**

Participants who went abroad to study largely found themselves receiving their education online. Almost all of them cited both pros and cons of online teaching. One aspect regarded as an advantage was the option of reviewing a difficult lesson. For this to work, it is important that the lesson content is adapted to the online teaching format, which was not always the case. According to participants, the most significant disadvantage of online teaching was the lack of social contact. Several students mentioned missing face-to-face interaction with classmates and teachers. Although most of the participants got used to online teaching over time, a few of them experienced problems with concentration and stress related to the online format.

## Internship from home

**'You can't just walk up to someone. People aren't always accessible.'**

Those doing an internship abroad had a higher chance of being allowed to be physically present in the workplace. Internship students who did have to work from home found good communication with their internship supervisor important, and although this was possible from home, many of them missed the spontaneity of face-to-face contact. The fact that it was not as easy to ask their supervisor or colleagues questions was perceived by some of the participants as a barrier to the learning process. Working from home was supported in various ways by the host companies, from lending equipment to adjusting the assignment to a working-from-home situation. A few of the internship students found that they had a greater degree of flexibility and less travel time due to not having to go into the office every day. At any rate, those who did continue to work in an office saw fewer colleagues in the workplace due to a sizeable proportion working from home.

## Evaluation of international experience

**'I still met some really nice people, great house-mates, and I was able to go out in the beginning. It was a really positive experience for me.'**

When asked how they felt about their time abroad, most of the students gave a positive assessment. A proportion of them enjoyed immersing themselves in a different culture and were enthusiastic, for example, about the hospitality and work-life balance in the destination country. These tended to be students who went abroad before the outbreak of the pandemic and therefore got to experience 'normal life' in the destination country.

Internship students also tended to cite the internship itself as a significant positive factor, with both the internship content and acquiring work experience and contacts for their future career being regarded as plus points. For those participants who studied abroad, a fun atmosphere in their student accommodation played a significant role in whether or not their experience abroad was positive, especially if they had little social contact outside home due to the coronavirus. The less positive points vary considerably from person to person and for the most part are down to the pandemic. Beyond the impact of COVID-19, the quality of the education or internship was not always in line with participants' expectations. For example, some course modules were not offered in English as promised, or the modules were not at the appropriate level. Disappointing factors sometimes cited by internship students include too little supervision and feeling insufficiently challenged.

## Experience abroad coloured by the pandemic

*'I've definitely grown. I will have moved to four different countries during the pandemic. You also learn adaptability and to accept the situation. It was tough, but it makes you more mentally resilient.'*

Almost all participants say that the coronavirus pandemic coloured their experience abroad. Only one student said the pandemic did not have much of an effect on her experience, because she was living in a bubble that allowed her social life to more or less continue as usual. And this social life is what the other participants feel they missed out on. Many of them experienced a lockdown in the destination country, making it difficult to establish or maintain social contacts. That said, having to be self-reliant in this way did lead to personal growth, several remarked. Words like self-knowledge, self-sufficiency, and independence were frequently used to describe personal qualities developed.

When it comes to the impact of COVID-19 on acquiring intercultural competencies such as knowledge of a foreign language or culture, the students were not always in agreement. For some, local lockdowns meant they learned hardly anything about other cultures, whilst others actually benefited from spending more time at home with housemates from a variety of international backgrounds. We also see a varied picture in terms of language acquisition, with one student having picked up less of the local language than hoped due to lockdowns and another stating that she in fact got more chance to practice her language skills, precisely because local lockdowns meant there were fewer international students around with whom she would have ended up speaking English.

Finally, the internship students say they were disappointed that they did not get to know their host company properly due to the coronavirus measures. Several participants were not particularly concerned about missing out on skills and experiences due to the pandemic, because they had already spent time abroad in 'normal' times. By contrast, others found this latest period abroad disappointing, as it failed to live up to expectations set by previous experiences abroad.

### Going abroad still recommended

Pandemic or not, the participants would heartily recommend spending time abroad. Many of them say that doing so forces you out of your comfort zone and teaches you a lot about yourself. Being abroad also opens you up to new experiences, such as getting to know new people, cultures and perspectives. Some participants advise going abroad once the pandemic is over, if possible (e.g., later in their study programme). However, in the words of one, 'If you can't wait, then just go for it!' The students also recommend choosing a destination that feels safe during the pandemic, for example somewhere closer to home.

## D. Conclusion and recommendations

### **Impact of the coronavirus pandemic on outbound mobility considerable**

Two-thirds of the respondents had to change or even cancel their plans to go abroad during the academic 2021-2022 year because of travel restrictions, or other coronavirus measures. Sometimes the decision was made for them by the educational institution at home or abroad. Although the pandemic has brought with it a great deal of uncertainty, Dutch students also seem to be optimistic, with 42% of all respondents pressing ahead with their plans to go abroad.

### **Students' enthusiasm has not waned, despite restrictions**

Out of every 10 students surveyed, 4 say that the Covid-19 pandemic did not change their mind about spending time abroad. Almost one-quarter said they were actually more interested in going abroad.

Seeing the world, getting to know other cultures, and working on personal development and intercultural skills are cited as important reasons for going abroad regardless of the pandemic. This is consistent with the accounts of the interviewed students who went ahead with their plans to go abroad last year. They say that they have experienced personal growth precisely because of the social restrictions brought about by the pandemic. They are almost unreservedly positive about their time abroad and would encourage fellow students not to be put off going.

### **Feeling safe plays a significant role**

Over a quarter of the students surveyed chose a different country than originally planned for their studies, internship, or gap year. Within this group, 7 out of 10 students had previously intended to go to a country outside of the European Economic Area (EEA), such as the USA, the UK or Australia. In the end, only 2 in 10 students who have plans to go abroad during the next academic year will actually go to a destination outside of the EEA. Most of the students surveyed will end up staying in the Netherlands or heading to a destination in Europe such as Belgium or Germany. For the majority of students, feeling safe is a major factor in choosing a destination. It would appear that the pandemic is prompting students to stay closer to home.

### **Online forms of education present opportunities**

More than a quarter of the students surveyed take a positive view of online forms of teaching as an alternative to actual experiences abroad. Although the interviewed students regard the lack of social contact with colleagues, classmates and teaching staff as the most significant downside of online activities, these forms of education also present opportunities. They have the potential to open up international experiences to all students. It is important to create a greater degree of synergy between all these forms of internationalisation to enable Dutch students to work on their international competencies and intercultural skills in a variety of ways.

# Colophon

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