

Mental Health and International Mobility

Report on Mobility Students and Volunteers' Mental Health



Index

Introduction	3
1. Findings from the ESN Survey (14th Edition) and the ESNvolunteer Survey (2021-2022)	4
2. Input from the Network's HR Manager	6
3. Input from the HR and Network Community Manager	7
4. Input from the Membership Team Coordinator	8
5. Input from the Training and Activities Community Manager	9
6. Conclusion	10

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Introduction

Even though the Covid-19 pandemic severely restricted the movements of university students who chose to participate in a study mobility program, throughout the entire duration of the pandemic, many young people were still allowed to continue their studies abroad with different types of arrangements, such as virtual exchanges or digital learning activities.

This means that throughout Europe, the pandemic strongly impacted the actions of the Erasmus Student Network, in particular the support we provide to young people on mobility. It was therefore highly important for our organisation to understand the consequences of the pandemic on the well-being of our volunteers as well as the young people they support in their daily work.

In January 2022, in cooperation with the Council of Europe and the European Youth Foundation, we launched a programme called “Mental Health Unboxed”, which aimed at raising awareness and improving the understanding of mental health issues and their effects on the lives of young people how they can take action and where they can seek help, as well as call for better support mechanism on the mental health for ESN volunteers and other young people, especially international students and youth in Europe.

While this programme included several trainings for our volunteers, it was also important to us to focus more on the current issues that the students and youth face when it comes to the topic of mental health and provide direct support to them. We, therefore, set up a task force, the “B-well Taskforce”, composed of our Support Structures Managers and Community Managers. The task force gathered information on the following topics:

- How did the pandemic influence our volunteer’s education and work as well as their personal and social life;
- What were the challenges that they have faced and factors that have contributed to their mental health issues;
- What type of support they have received and the support they think they should and (or) like to receive.

Their findings, as long as their recommendations are gathered in this document.

1. Findings from the ESN Survey (14th Edition) and the ESNvolunteer Survey (2021-2022)

In 2022, ESN International published two surveys that give us a clear understanding of how the pandemic has impacted the work of ESN and the mental health of young people.

The 14th Edition of the ESN Survey¹, our flagship research project on international students, took a closer look at the effect of Covid-19 on the mobility experiences of young people, and its key findings show a clear difference in the experience of mobile young people from before and during the pandemic.

- *Satisfaction with Social Life of Exchange Students*

Even during the pandemic, satisfaction with social life remained quite high for students and trainees, but there was a significant drop in comparison to before the pandemic: “the pre-pandemic level of satisfaction was 20% higher than the one during”. The satisfaction of young people doing Erasmus+ traineeships was particularly lower than that of students, which can be explained by the fact that trainees face additional challenges, such as not being able to take part in integration activities from the universities, or being less aware of their possibilities regarding the support from student organisations.

- *Integration in the Local Community*

The pandemic also had a significant impact on the integration of mobile young people in their local communities: “almost half of the respondents did not feel integrated with the local community, with less than one-fifth feeling fully integrated (16.19%)”. Before the pandemic, 19.36% of mobile young people felt totally integrated.

- *Participation in Group Activities involving the Hosting Communities*

During the Covid-19 pandemic, 59.36% of the respondents of our survey affirmed that they did not take part in any organized group activities in their hosting communities, while it was 47.68% of the respondents who did not participate in these before the pandemic.

¹ Erasmus Student Network (2022). Understanding the experience and needs of exchange students in challenging times. ESNsurvey - XIV edition.

The 2021-2022 ESNvolunteer Survey², our research project aiming at surveying ESN volunteers on various aspects of their engagement, also examined the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the volunteers.

- Stronger Impact on the Local Level

While our volunteers on the international level shared that the pandemic had only a small impact on them (83.87% of the respondents), volunteers involved on the local level were more impacted, as only 69.74% of them shared the same feeling. While volunteers on the international level are used to working remotely with online tools, volunteers whose work is directly connected to the presence, or absence in this case, of international students, were therefore more impacted by the situation and experienced a lack of motivation and loss of purpose for their volunteer work.

- Long-term negative impact on ESN

Another cause for the lack of motivation or loss of purpose that volunteers have felt may also be connected to the fear that the pandemic could have a long-term negative impact on their organisation. Among the responses, their main fears of a negative impact were due to:

- Lack of motivated volunteers (26.8%)
- Lower number of exchange students (20.2%)
- Inability to recruit new volunteers (13.9%)
- Loss of funding sources (10.4%)

- Emotional support

On a positive note, respondents of the survey (39.7%) shared that they received strong emotional support from their peers during the pandemic, whether it was from ESN International (8.4%), ESN on the national level (12.2%), or ESN on the local level (26.8%).

The pandemic showed us how resilient ESN is and that we can continue working together despite the restrictions, the changes and the uncertainty around us. Even though we faced some challenges, the network became stronger and more united than before.

² Erasmus Student Network (2022). Research Report. ESNvolunteer Survey 2021-2022.

2. Input from the Network's HR Manager

For the purpose of this project, we interviewed volunteers from the international level of ESN whose work is mostly done in an online environment. Some of them are still studying while some have finished their studies and are now working full-time.

When it comes to education during the pandemic, many countries, schools, colleges, and universities were closed for extended periods of time and shifted to online learning platforms. This led to major disruptions in the education life of our volunteers.

For students, the sudden shift to online learning was not always smooth and many struggled with the lack of in-person support and resources. Some students also had difficulty accessing the internet or appropriate technology for online learning.

Additionally, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of students due to the stress and uncertainty caused by the crisis. Measures such as social distancing, mask mandates, and lockdowns during the pandemic had an impact on their personal and social life.

On a personal level, the pandemic has caused many people to experience increased levels of stress, anxiety, and loneliness due to social isolation and the uncertainty of the situation. Many people also experienced financial difficulties as a result of job loss or reduced work hours.

On a social level, the pandemic has disrupted the way people interact with one another. In-person gatherings, such as parties, events, and sports games, were cancelled or postponed, leading to a decrease in socialization. Many volunteers have turned to virtual platforms, such as Discord, in order to stay connected with friends and loved ones.

The pandemic has presented a wide range of challenges for volunteers. Some of the main challenges that have faced include:

- Health risks: for them or their loved ones
- Economic impacts: job disruptions and financial problems
- Social isolation: feelings of loneliness and isolation from people
- Educational disruption
- Mental health impacts: stress and anxiety

When it comes to supporting, volunteers are putting an emphasis on prioritizing mental health. This can be done through workshops, campaigns, and using ESN to spread awareness among local communities.

Unfortunately, most of the impacts of the pandemic were negative on the people but there were some positives that are worth mentioning such as: learning new skills, prioritizing, not taking things for granted, and wanting to help those in need.

3. Input from the HR and Network Community Manager

For a general summary of the impact on volunteers' education, employment and personal lives, we can say that most education was happening online, and most of the jobs moved to part-time format, which led to many young people working in restaurants, bars, etc. to lose their jobs. While this increase in spare time and the online format of education helped with study progress for some students, for many students it led to discouragement by the lack of social contacts, constant changes to regulations and perceived loss of control. The severe reduction of social contacts was ultimately closely connected to a large increase in mental health issues among volunteers.

We can say that the following factors and challenges contributed to mental health issues: lack of motivation from constant online events and meetings, which through time denied volunteers and students the moment to socialise; which was then exacerbated by the fact that organising online events for ESN had diminishing returns. It all contributed to the feeling that there is no sense in volunteering since it is not appreciated by international students and there were only limited ways to socialise with team members.

The recruitment of new volunteers became an issue in many sections, as they either struggled to retain members or failed to get people interested in the first place. This led to fewer people applying to board positions and positions of responsibility - and the remaining people were left with a higher workload, which increased the risk of burnout and other mental health issues in the volunteers. Stress and the sense of responsibility for international students contributed to the burden carried by people actively working for ESN. This all led to questions and realities that when new generations of volunteers come to the organisation, they would face a stressful

start while experiencing a lack of knowledge by missing a proper knowledge transfer. On a more positive note, volunteers said that they could really get to know themselves more through more time they had.

Volunteers reported that the support they received from friends and family was the main factor that helped them go through days and keep a sense of 'normal' in their University and ESN lives. What could have been more helpful, and that should be improved in the next semesters, would be to have more online workshops, which would have taken some of the work off volunteer shoulders, and it would also have been a concrete way to offer something tangible to do and to work on for volunteers whose workload were reduced because of the pandemic. However, on a more positive note, the situation is getting better; the topic of burnout and mental health are touched upon via workshops and lecturers, and addressing the issue was a good way for volunteers to have it clear and to make it easier to put the health as a priority as it should be.

4. Input from the Membership Team Coordinator

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the university and the working life of the volunteers. People needed time to adapt to the new reality of online classes and work and they were less motivated. Social distancing also had a negative impact on the mood of the volunteers. Furthermore, while working, studying and socializing online from home online, people had a hard time separating work time from entertainment time and they reduced their personal caring time.

The main struggles that volunteers referred to are:

- Fear for the health of beloved ones
- Disappointment from cancelled plans and dreams. Insecurity
- Problems in socializing with friends and relatives
- Difficulties in Education and work life
- Lack of confidence in undertaking new challenges
- Difficulties and disappointment with their arranged mobilities

Some of the volunteers sought professional psychological support while others decided to socialize online with friends (and fellow ESNers) by organizing online activities (meetings,

games etc). Some people also took some time off from socializing so that they can put some attention on themselves.

The above situation was also reflected in the ESN life of volunteers. People felt less motivated (as the motivation often comes out from socializing with ESNers and Erasmus students), uncertain about the future of the network and less confident about undertaking new positions.

In similar situations, it would be nice to make all the volunteers feel that we are a family and nobody is alone facing struggles. We have also to accept that some people need may need some time alone even during ESN events when socializing can be intense.

5. Input from the Training and Activities Community Manager

In the Training and Activities community, volunteers confirmed that the pandemic influenced their education/work or personal/social life. Almost everyone experienced influence in their education, with a big part of it changing from an offline to an online format. For part of them, it influenced them badly because they got worse academic results, more stress working and teaching in that way, some experience classes being behind in the materials and not finishing planned topics, and also a lack of motivation to study and attend classes. And for some, it influenced them for the better because they were able to work full time while finishing their educations, and some also had a personal preference for the new format of education.

Next to that, the pandemic had a big influence on their personal life, where a lot of them missed the perks of offline education – socializing with others. Some experienced changes in their personalities because going from being a social person to being isolated and then back with people was an adjustment process that they felt on their skin. Also, they mentioned a lack of human touch and intimacy. Some felt the growth of enjoying their own company and appreciating more time with others.

Many of the volunteers interviewed for this project feel like they are experiencing, or they had experienced in the past, some mental health issues. The challenges mentioned were anxiety, stress, panic attacks, exhaustion, and eating disorders. Some of them had a similar experience before the pandemic, so they found the balance, but others had a strong feeling of uselessness

filled with panic attacks. Volunteers experienced feelings of doubting themselves, overthinking, comparison, and perfectionism were part of everyday life for some.

In the end, volunteers shared about the support they have received and the support they think they should and/or like to receive: while all experiences are different, some feel like they didn't receive the needed support, while others after joining ESN felt needed support because of the community feeling of sharing the same values.

Volunteers also face struggles inside the ESN, which include feelings of pressure to give 100% all the time, emphasizing participation at the events. Based on that and other experiences, our volunteers shared their perspectives on possible solutions:

- Consider and try to understand other's feelings and health, without comparing;
- Rethinking and rescheduling time in which volunteers work on ESN obligations;
- Planning more sustainable events with more breaks with included space for personal time;
- Awareness and sharing of how to deal with judgments, giving/receiving feedback, and adjustment to the intense lifestyle of volunteers;
- More workshops on mental health on all levels of the Network.

With these small but valuable inputs, we can see some good sides, but even more important opportunities to revolve, learn from mistakes and grow.

6. Conclusion

Thanks to the data we have collected through our surveys, and the research made by our Support Structures managers and Community leaders, we have a good understanding of how the Covid-19 pandemic affected the health and well-being of young people. This input will be absolutely essential for our network to foster a healthier volunteering environment for the young people of our network, as well as create healthier events, training and workshops. Only by supporting our volunteers will we be able to grow stronger as a community, and have an even greater impact on young people's mobility experiences.



