



**EUROSTUDENT  
Talks**

**19.02.2026**

**Why (not) to choose  
virtual study experiences  
abroad: insights from  
Germany**

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DAAD**

**DAAD**

Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst  
German Academic Exchange Service

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# Overview

- Data Basis: BintHo Survey
- Defining Virtual, Hybrid and Blended... Mobility?
- Results and Conclusions
- Open (Research) Questions...
- Recommended Reading
- Q & A





**Data Basis:  
BintHo Survey**



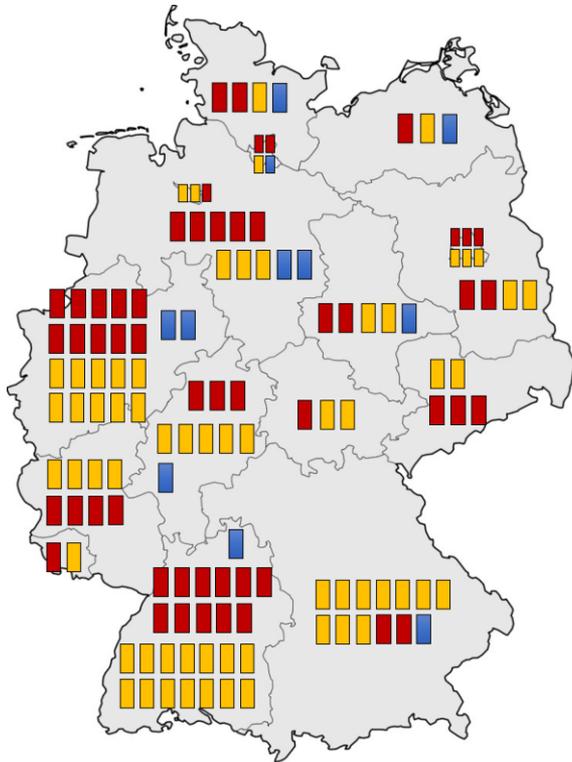
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# Data Basis: BintHo Survey

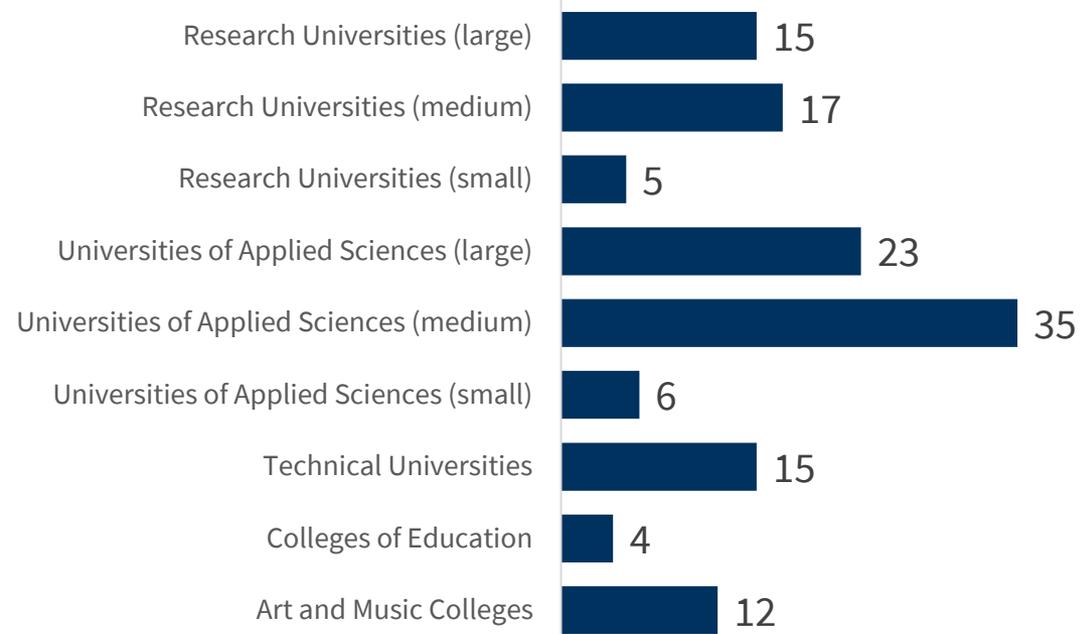
## What is the „Benchmark internationale Hochschule“ (BintHo Survey)?

- DAAD survey of domestic and international students and doctoral candidates, conducted **every three years since the 2020/21 winter semester**
- **Domestic students:** assessment of planned or completed study-related stays abroad, mobility motives and barriers, virtual and hybrid experiences abroad
- **International students:** assessment of reasons for choosing Germany and their university in Germany, application and visa issuance processes, study experience in Germany, satisfaction with life and study in Germany, intention to stay after graduation (what for, where, how long)
- **Both student groups:** assessment of study situation, diversity characteristics, internationality of studies / Internationalisation at Home (IaH), experience with xenophobic discrimination

# How many universities and students participated in the second BinHo Survey in the 2023/24 winter semester?



- 56 Universities
- 64 Universities of Applied Sciences
- 12 Art and Music Colleges



**Total:** approx. 1.4 million students and doctoral students at 132 participating universities, of whom around 120,000 took part in the BinHo Survey (net response rate: approx. 8%), including ~95.000 domestic and ~21,000 international students (at Bachelor's or Master's level)

A woman with glasses and a man with glasses and a beard are looking at a glass wall covered in yellow sticky notes. The woman is on the left, and the man is on the right, resting his chin on his hand in a thoughtful pose. A large teal circle is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing the text.

## Defining Virtual, Hybrid and Blended... Mobility?

# How can „virtual student mobility“ be defined?

## UNESCO

„[A] form of mobility that uses information and communication technologies to facilitate cross-border and/or inter-institutional academic, cultural, and experiential exchanges and collaboration which may be credit-bearing or not for credit“

## Univerza v Mariboru: Erasmus+ Virtual mobility

„[T]he participation in relevant digital learning activities offered by an international partner university other than the home university. The activities are offered for educational purposes and/or allow students to acquire new competences and knowledge, without the necessity of physical mobility.“



# How can „hybrid“ or „blended“ student mobility be defined?

## UNESCO

“A third type of student mobility is hybrid student mobility (HSM). This combines elements of both physical and virtual mobility. If we consider VSM and PSM as the two ends of the mobility spectrum, HSM covers the wide variation in between.”

## European Commission

“Blended mobility is a combination of physical mobility with a virtual component facilitating a collaborative online learning exchange and teamwork. For example, the virtual component can bring learners together online from different countries and study fields to follow online courses or work collectively and simultaneously on assignments that are recognised as part of their studies.”

→ Often used interchangeably, but sometimes also used to differentiate between simultaneous (hybrid) and staggered (blended) sequences of virtual and physical elements.



# Should we call it mobility? I am not convinced...

## Wikipedia

“Academic mobility refers to students and researchers in higher education **moving** to another institution inside or outside of their own country to study or teach for a limited time.“

## OECD

“International student mobility: The **movement** of students across borders to pursue higher education in foreign countries (...).“

→ Physical and virtual student mobility can be distinguished based on the **question whether students move to another country or not**. So why call both “mobility” and obscure the main difference between them?

# Should we call it mobility? I am not convinced...

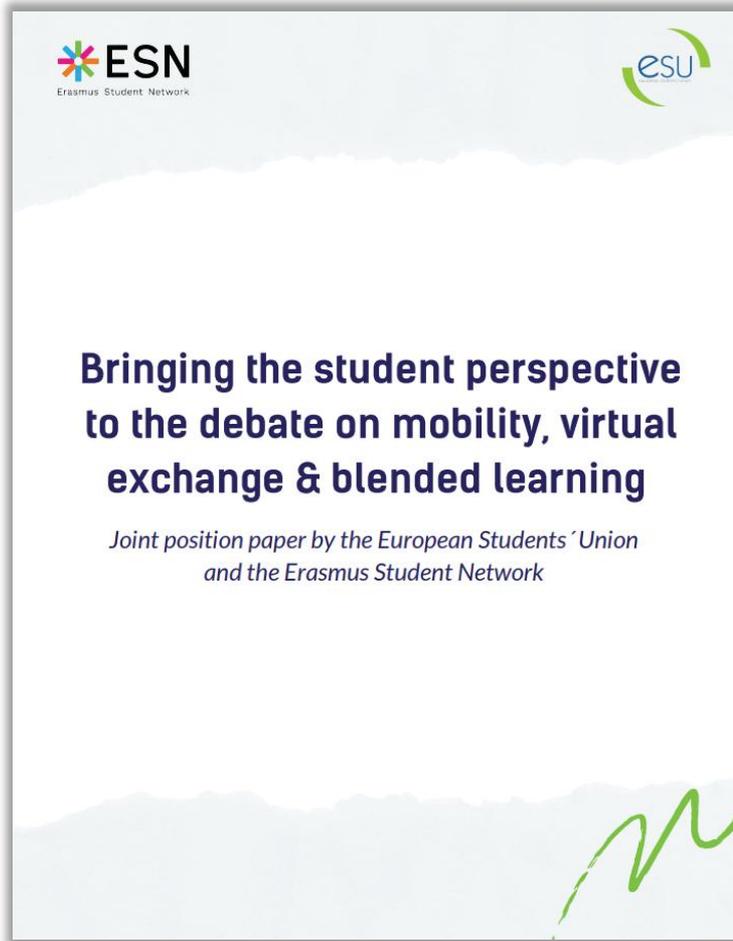
**Piet Van Hove, Secretary General of the HEROES European Universities Alliance**  
(EAIE Blog, 23 September 2021)

“While it may be useful for other reasons, following online courses from a university in another country is not in itself a very rich or effective form of internationalisation. Why then do we call it ‘virtual mobility’? **I would propose to reserve the term ‘mobility’ for its original meaning: physically traveling to another country. Following online courses simply has nothing to do with mobility.**

**I argue therefore that ‘virtual mobility’ is a misleading and useless term. We don’t need it.** What ultimately matters are intense, purposeful, meaningful interactions between students from diverse backgrounds, and between students and teachers. These interactions can happen online or face-to-face. While mobility remains an essential and incredibly valuable tool in this respect, it is definitely not the only one. We have a rich toolbox of impactful activities we can develop in our field of internationalisation of higher education. Calling some of them ‘virtual mobility’ – as being somehow equivalent to physical mobility – is not a useful distinction. **Let’s focus instead on maximising the impact of what we do, both face-to-face and online.”**

→ <https://www.eaie.org/resource/words-matter-virtual-mobility.html>

# Should we call it mobility? I am not convinced...



## Joint joint position paper on mobility, virtual exchange and blended learning published in 2022 by ESU and ESN

”International virtual learning activities **cannot be used as a discount substitute to reach mobility quotas** and seen as providing a similar benefit for the participants, as previously advocated by ESN and ESU. The **international experience gained by mobile students can only be truly experienced in person**. Virtual learning is to be seen as an add-on to physical mobility, complementing it instead of replacing it. Therefore, when counting participants in international mobility, **participants in virtual activities should not be counted as “mobile students”** but as another category, and funding for these activities should not be taken from the budgets for student mobility.”

→ <https://tinyurl.com/3yyn3b6b>



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**Results and  
Conclusions**



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# Assessment of the attractiveness of (purely) virtual international experiences abroad

“Imagine a situation in which you could have attended all lectures, seminars and classes, and taken all examinations and tests in your study-related stay abroad online and without leaving Germany. Would a ‘virtual stay abroad’ of this kind have been an attractive alternative to completing the stay abroad in person?”

“Imagine a situation in which you could undertake a study visit at a higher education institution abroad or a work placement with an employer abroad online and without leaving Germany instead of travelling in person. Would a purely ‘virtual stay abroad’ of this kind have been an attractive option for you?”

- A) Stay for study purposes
- B) Stay for work placement“

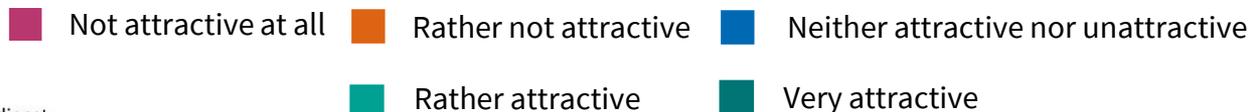
Students with physical study-related mobility experiences



Students without physical study-related mobility experiences, assessment: study abroad



Students without physical study-related mobility experiences, assessment: work placement abroad



# Assessment of the attractiveness of hybrid or blended international experiences abroad

“Now we would like you to imagine another situation. Instead of undertaking a stay abroad as part of your studies, imagine you were able to combine a short stay abroad of up to 30 days with one or more phases of online collaboration with students abroad. Would a mixture of this kind which combines a short in-person stay with online collaborations be an attractive alternative to an in-person stay?”

“Now we would like you to imagine another hypothetical situation. Instead of undertaking your planned stay abroad as part of your studies, what if you were able to combine a short stay abroad of up to 30 days with one or more phases of online collaboration with students abroad? Would combining a short in-person stay with online collaborations in this form be an attractive alternative to a longer in-person stay?”

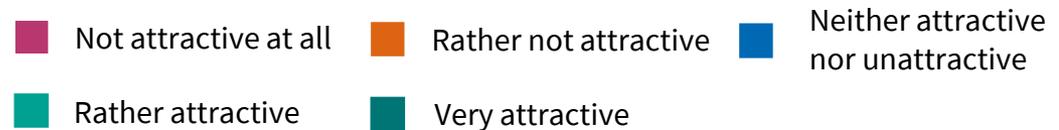
Students with physical study-related mobility experiences



Students without physical study-related mobility experiences: stay abroad not yet realised, but specifically planned

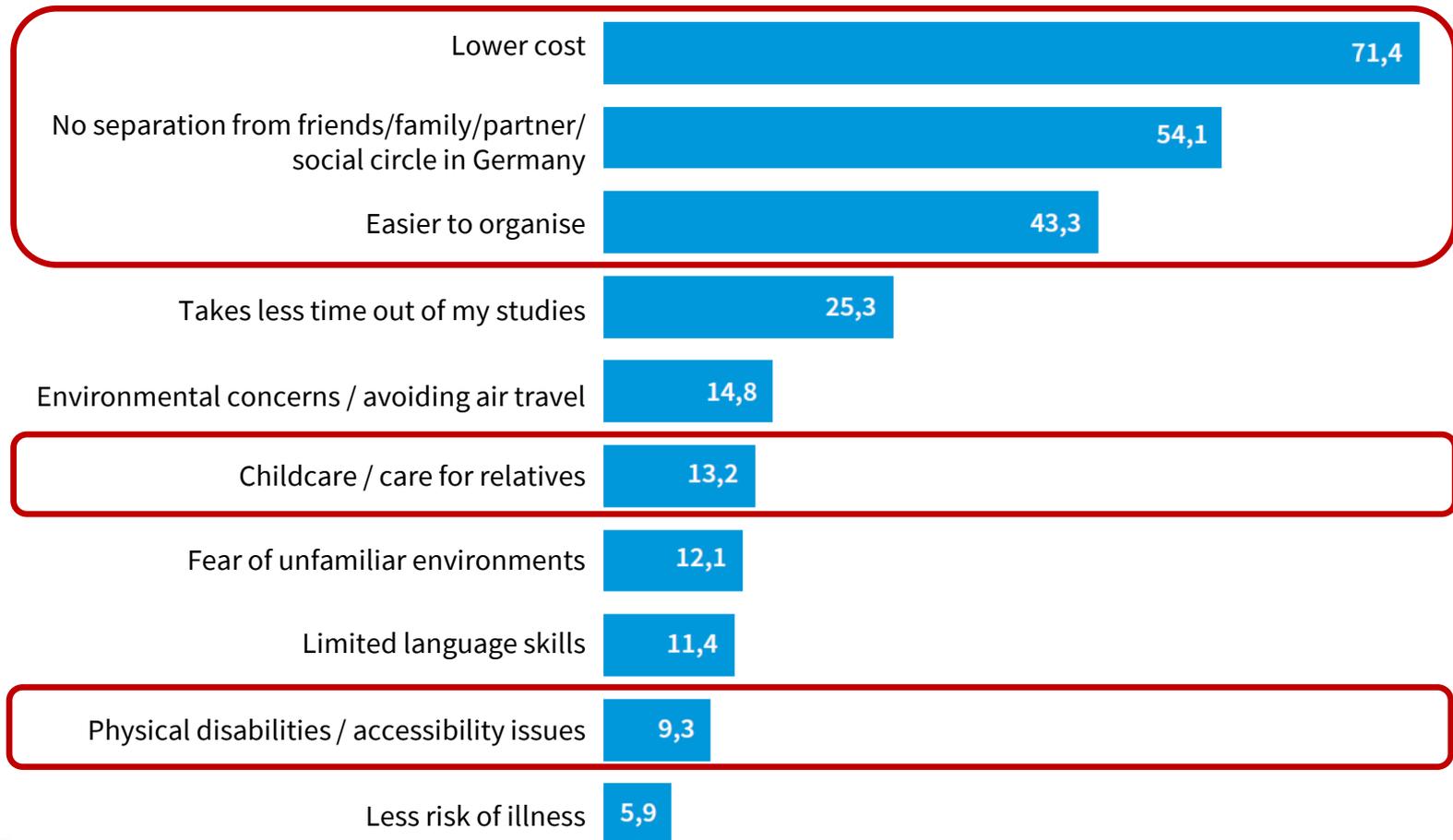


Students without physical study-related mobility experiences: stay abroad planned, but failed to realise



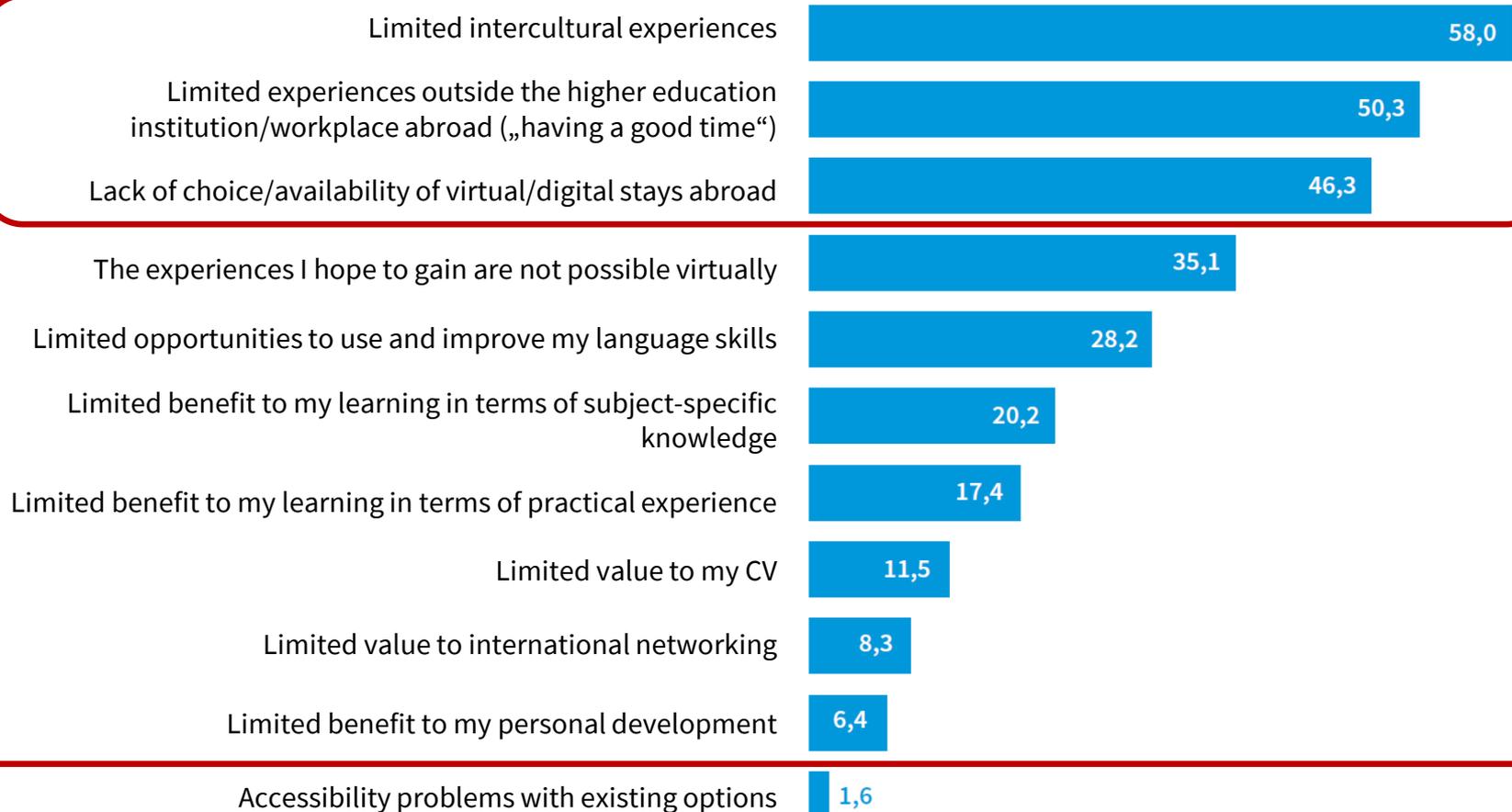
# The most important reasons for virtual experiences abroad (from the perspective of students)

“In your view, what are the most important reasons for undertaking a study-related stay abroad in such a virtual form? Please choose up to three reasons.”



# The main reasons against virtual experiences abroad (from the perspective of students)

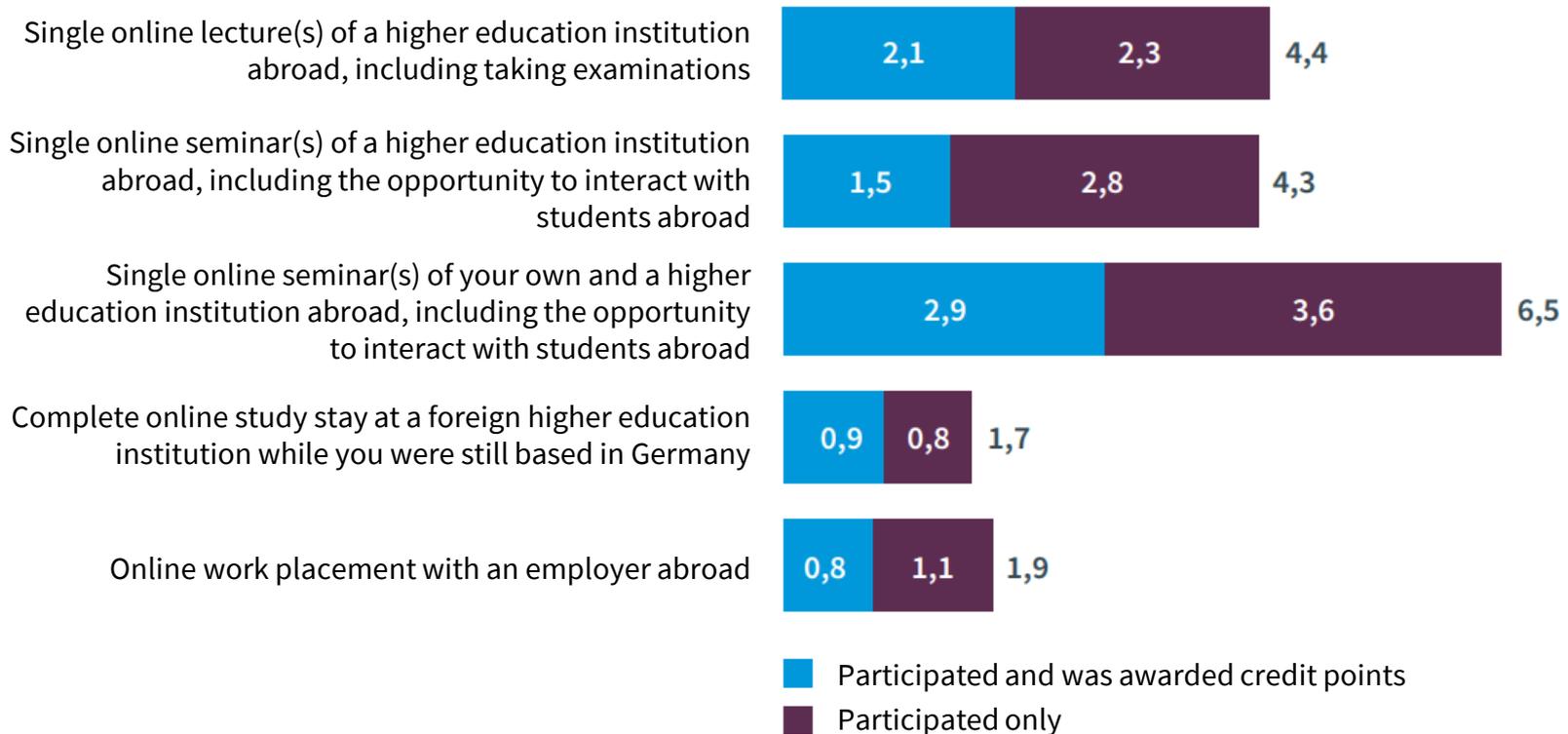
“In your view, what are the most important reasons against undertaking a study-related stay abroad in such a virtual form? Please choose up to three reasons.”



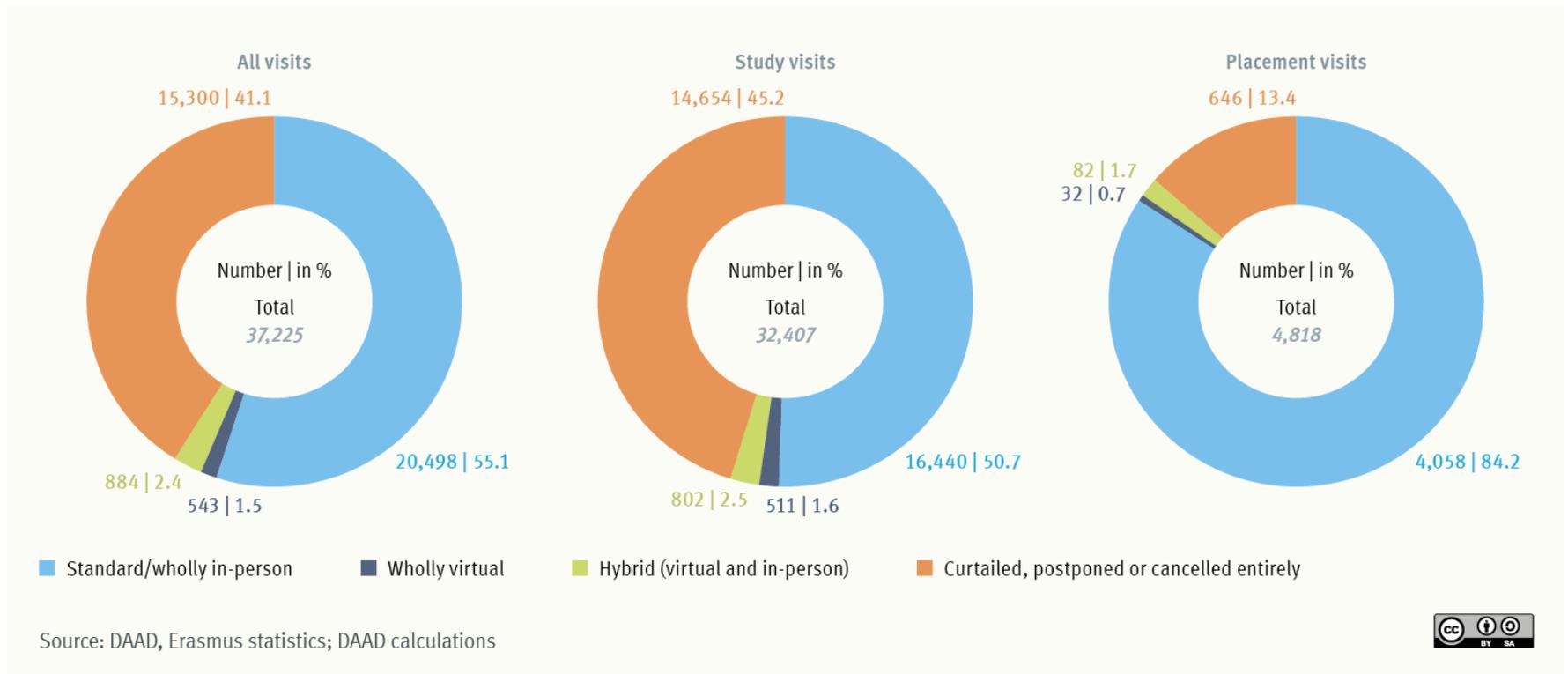
# Use of virtual international courses and placements 1/3

“Now we would like to turn your attention away from your ‘real’ (i.e. in-person) stay abroad. Have you ever had any of the following virtual study-related international experiences while you have been in Germany? If you have, please tell us whether your home institutions awarded credit points for your experiences.”

## All Students (with and without physical experiences abroad)



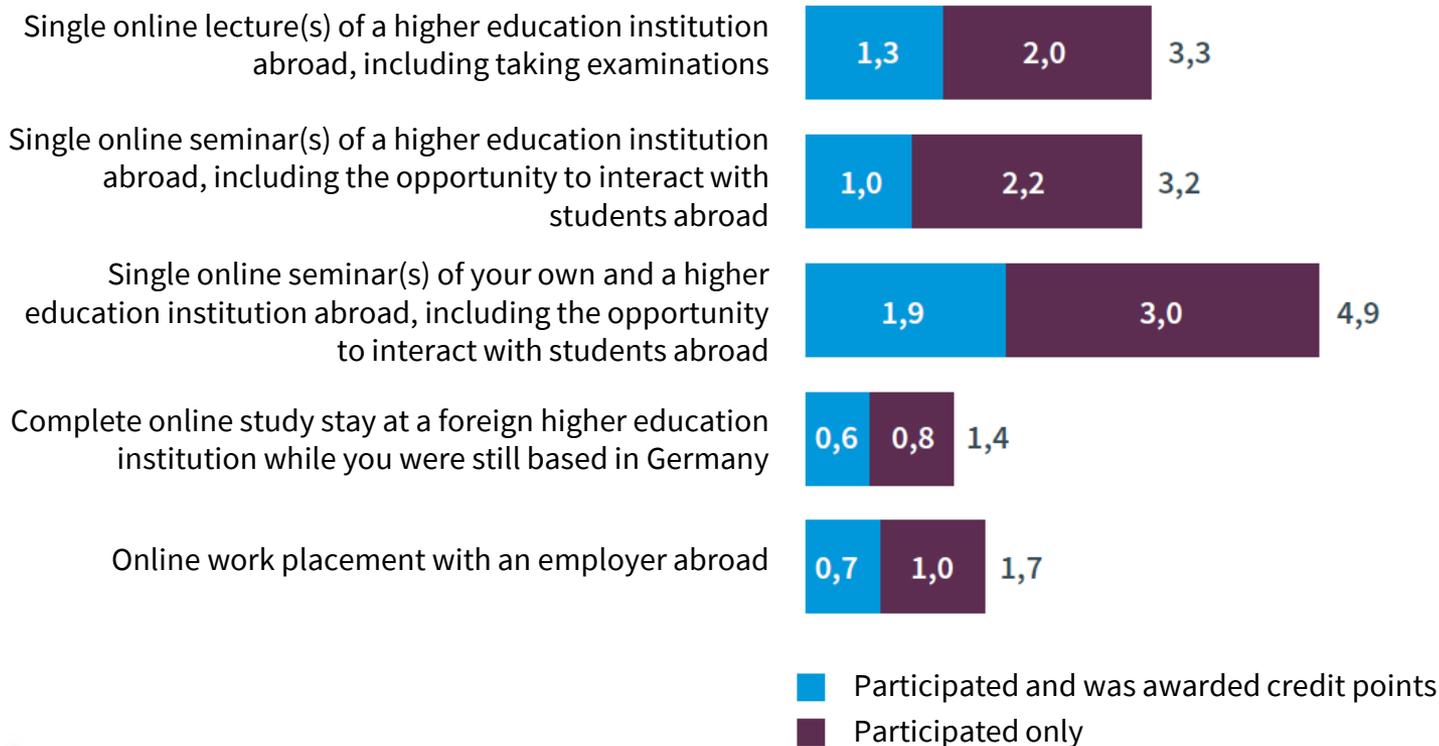
# Erasmus visits completed by students from Germany by type of visit, beginning between July 2020 and May 2021



# Use of virtual international courses and placements 3/3

“Now we would like to turn your attention away from your ‘real’ (i.e. in-person) stay abroad. Have you ever had any of the following virtual study-related international experiences while you have been in Germany? If you have, please tell us whether your home institutions awarded credit points for your experiences.”

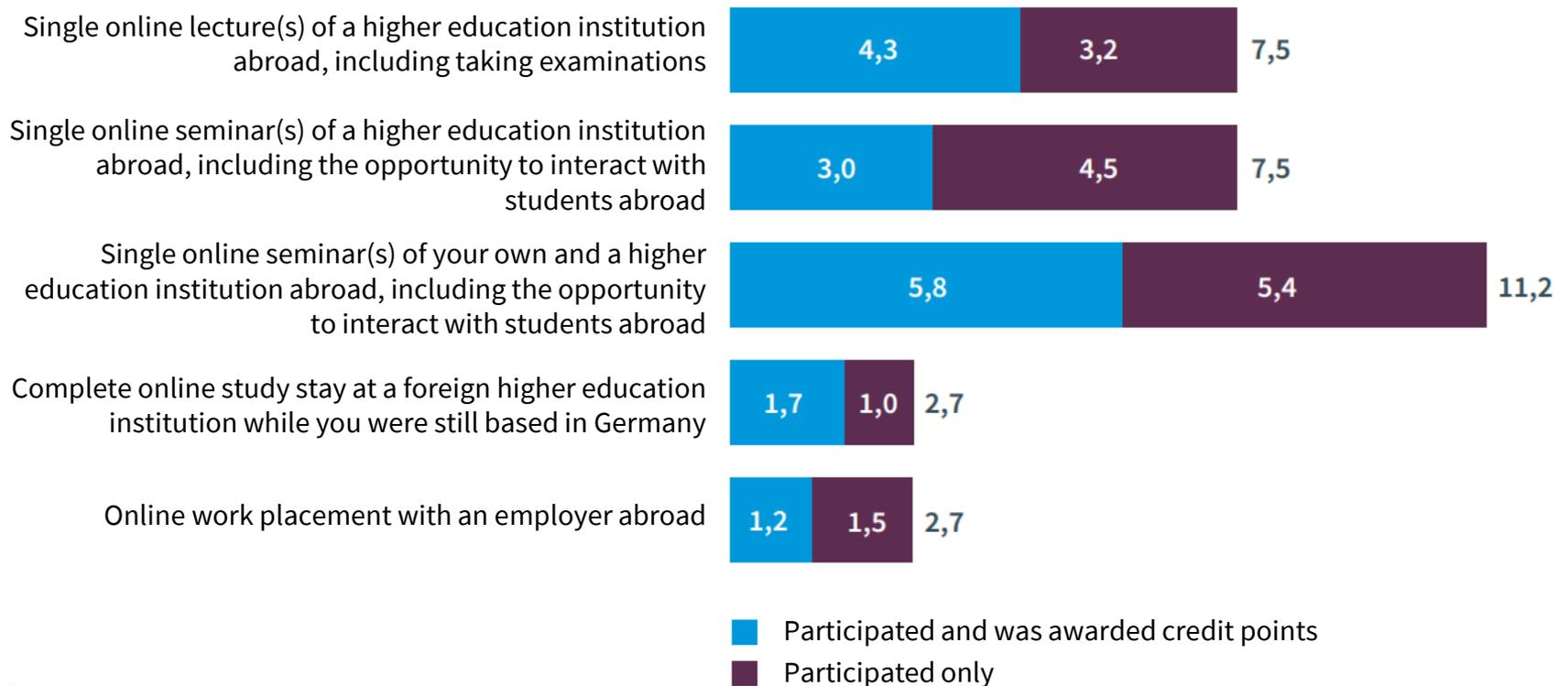
## Students *without* physical experiences abroad



# Use of virtual international courses and placements 2/3

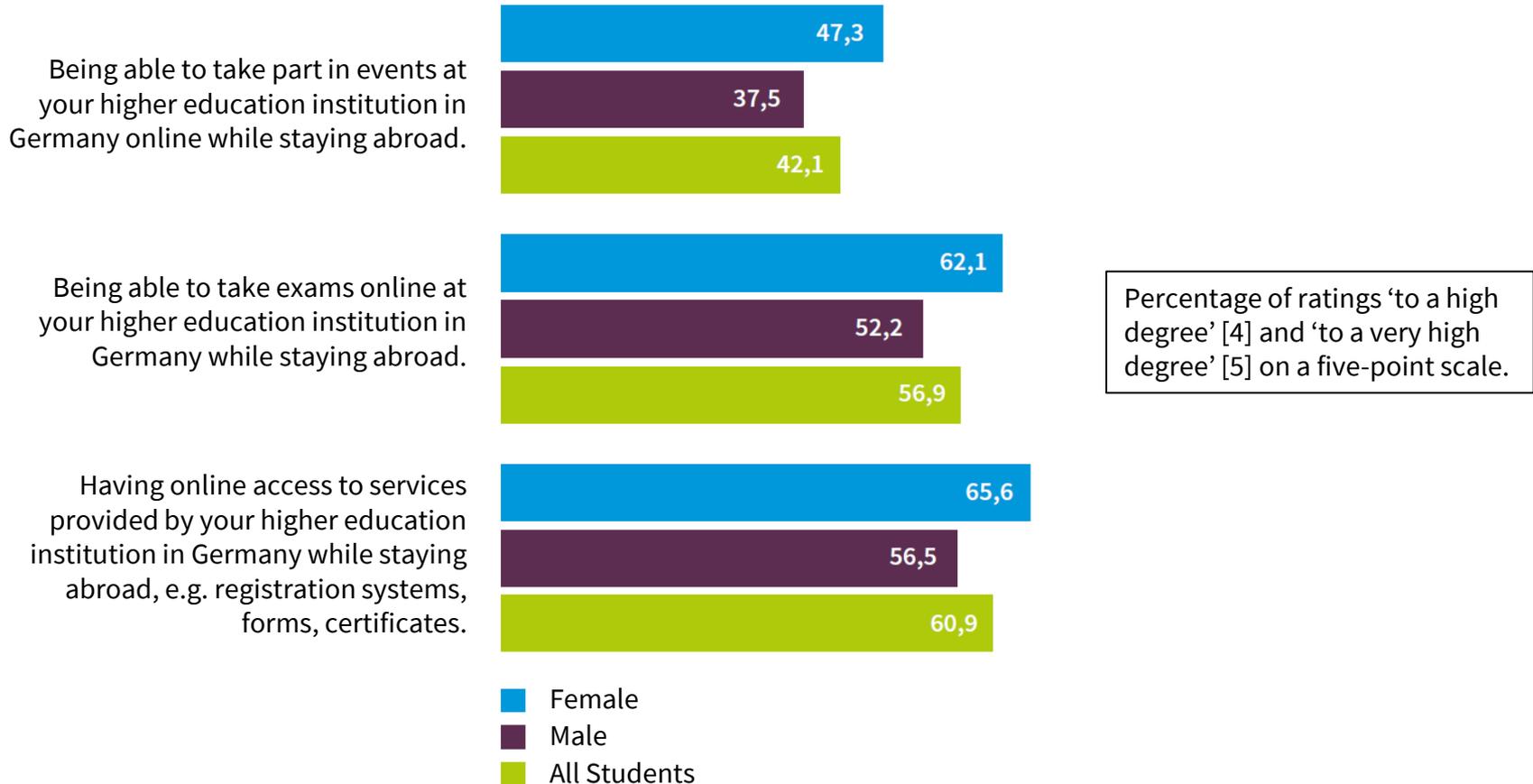
“Now we would like to turn your attention away from your ‘real’ (i.e. in-person) stay abroad. Have you ever had any of the following virtual study-related international experiences while you have been in Germany? If you have, please tell us whether your home institutions awarded credit points for your experiences.”

## Students *with* physical experiences abroad



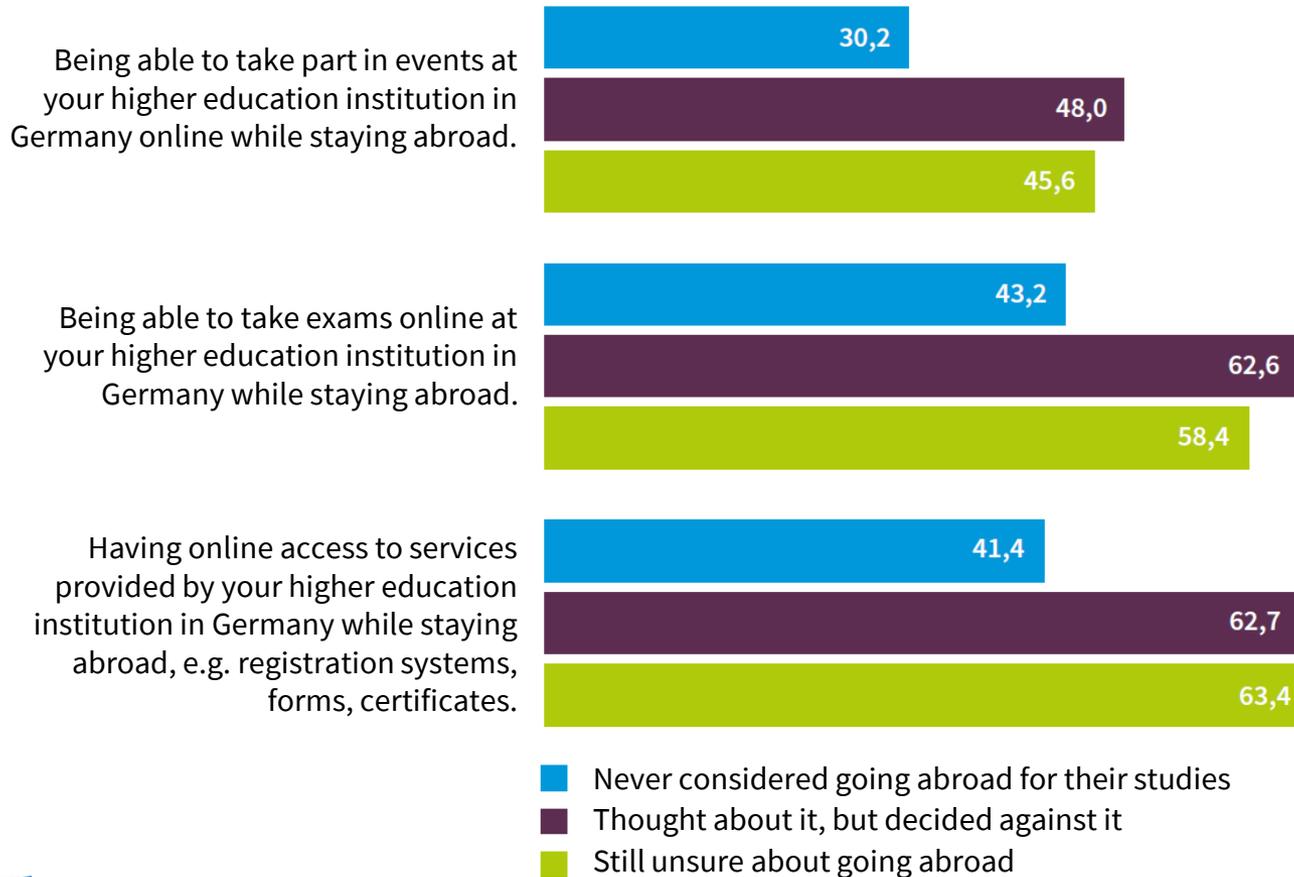
# Mobilisation potential of digital offerings by the home university 1/2: gender differences

“How far would the following factors increase your willingness to complete a study-related stay abroad?”



# Mobilisation potential of digital offerings by the home university 2/2: differences by mobility affinity

“How far would the following factors increase your willingness to complete a study-related stay abroad?”



# Conclusions 1/2

- Hybrid or blended experiences abroad are rated much more attractive than (purely) virtual experiences abroad.
- Students without physical experiences abroad during their studies rate virtual experiences abroad much more positively than students who have already spent time abroad in person as part of their studies.
- Students who planned a physical study-related stay abroad but failed to realise it rate hybrid or blended experiences abroad most positively.
- The most important reasons for virtual experiences abroad named by the surveyed students are (1) lower costs, (2) no separation from their social circle in Germany and (3) an easier implementation (compared to physical stays abroad).
- The most important reasons against virtual experiences abroad named by the surveyed students are (1) limited intercultural experiences, (2) limited experiences outside the higher education institution/workplace abroad (“having a good time”) and (3) the lack of choice/availability of virtual/digital stays abroad.

## Conclusions 2/2

- The most common type of study-related virtual experiences abroad are online seminars of their own and/or a higher education institution abroad as well as online lectures of a higher education institution abroad.
- Students with physical experiences abroad during their studies report virtual experiences abroad twice as often as students without physical experiences abroad.
- Study-related virtual experiences abroad are still a minority phenomenon: only about 7 % of the students surveyed use the most common form (online seminars of their own and a higher education institution abroad).
- The greatest potential for mobilisation of digital offerings currently still lies in the provision of teaching, examination and advisory services for (potential) internationally mobile students by their home university.

# Open (Research) Questions...

- What are the differences in the impact of physical student mobility and virtual experiences abroad on the micro and macro level?
- Can the offerings or designs of virtual experiences abroad be optimized to enable a higher level of inclusion?
- Do we want more virtual experiences abroad even if that will mean less physical student mobility? Or, to put it more generally: How important is physical presence for the (ideal) study experience?

# Recommended reading



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**RESEARCH BRIEF**  
July 2022

## Introducing Virtual Student Exchange in international university education

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**ABSTRACT**

Virtual Exchange (VE) is an umbrella term which refers to the numerous online learning initiatives and methodologies which engage learners in sustained online collaborative learning and interaction with partners from different cultural backgrounds as part of their study programmes. This article reviews the differences between VE and the activities of Virtual Mobility and Blended Mobility. Following that, the main learning outcomes for teachers and students engaged in VE are outlined. The article concludes by proposing how universities can consider the activity within their internationalisation programmes and how they can support its take up among teaching staff. It is argued that VE is not in competition with physical mobility programmes, nor is it an 'emergency tool' to be considered only in times of pandemics and limited international travel. Instead, VE should be considered as a preparation for or complement to physical mobility which serves to enhance the range of international learning experiences which an institution offers its students.

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a huge impact on student international mobility programmes. In the immediate outbreak of COVID-19, many international students found themselves in foreign campuses but without being able to attend classes or to socialise in their new surroundings. For others who were planning to travel, their international mobilities were completely cancelled (Gabriels, & Benke-Aberg, 2020). As an alternative, many universities offered their incoming international students virtual alternatives to being physically present on campus. In the United States, Martel (2020) found that 78% of institutions offered international students the option of taking online courses instead of engaging in physical mobility. Various European surveys carried out soon after the first year of the pandemic (European Commission, 2020; Gabriels & Benke-Aberg, 2020) reported that more than half of students had been offered taking online learning at the host university as an alternative to their physical mobility

**AUTHOR**



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## Reading and Resources for Virtual Exchange & Blended Mobility

### Introduction

Virtual Exchange (VE) refers to online learning initiatives and methodologies which engage learners in collaborative learning and interaction with partners from different cultural backgrounds as part of their study programs. Blended Mobility combines stages of online collaboration with short periods of physical mobility.

Robert O'Dowd (Professor at la Universidad de León, Spain) has curated this list of resources and readings about Virtual Exchange and Blended Mobility in higher education. If you have questions or wish to connect with Robert, you can email him at [robert.odowd@unileon.es](mailto:robert.odowd@unileon.es) or find him on [LinkedIn](#) and [Bluesky](#) (@robdowd.bsky.social). This list is updated regularly, and suggested additions are welcome.

Robert's most recent monograph [Internationalising Higher Education and the Role of Virtual Exchange](#) was published by Routledge in 2023. You can also access an Open Access copy of the edited volume [Virtual Innovation and Support Networks](#) (2024) - Exploring the impact of Virtual Exchange in teacher education, co-edited by Robert and Margarita Vinagre.

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### Information for Universities and Management

#### Documents for International Offices and University Management

- [Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange: Handbook for International Relations Officers](#)
- [Stevens Initiative: Virtual Exchange Guide for Senior International Officers](#)
- [Example of a university's internationalisation strategy incorporating Virtual Exchange](#)
- [Joint position paper by the European Students' Union and the Erasmus Student Network on Virtual Exchange and Blended Mobility](#)
- [DAAD Research Brief: Introducing Virtual Student Exchange in international university education - by Robert O'Dowd](#)
- [Strategic framework for the integration of Blended Mobility and Virtual Exchange in Higher Education Institutions by The Frames project](#)

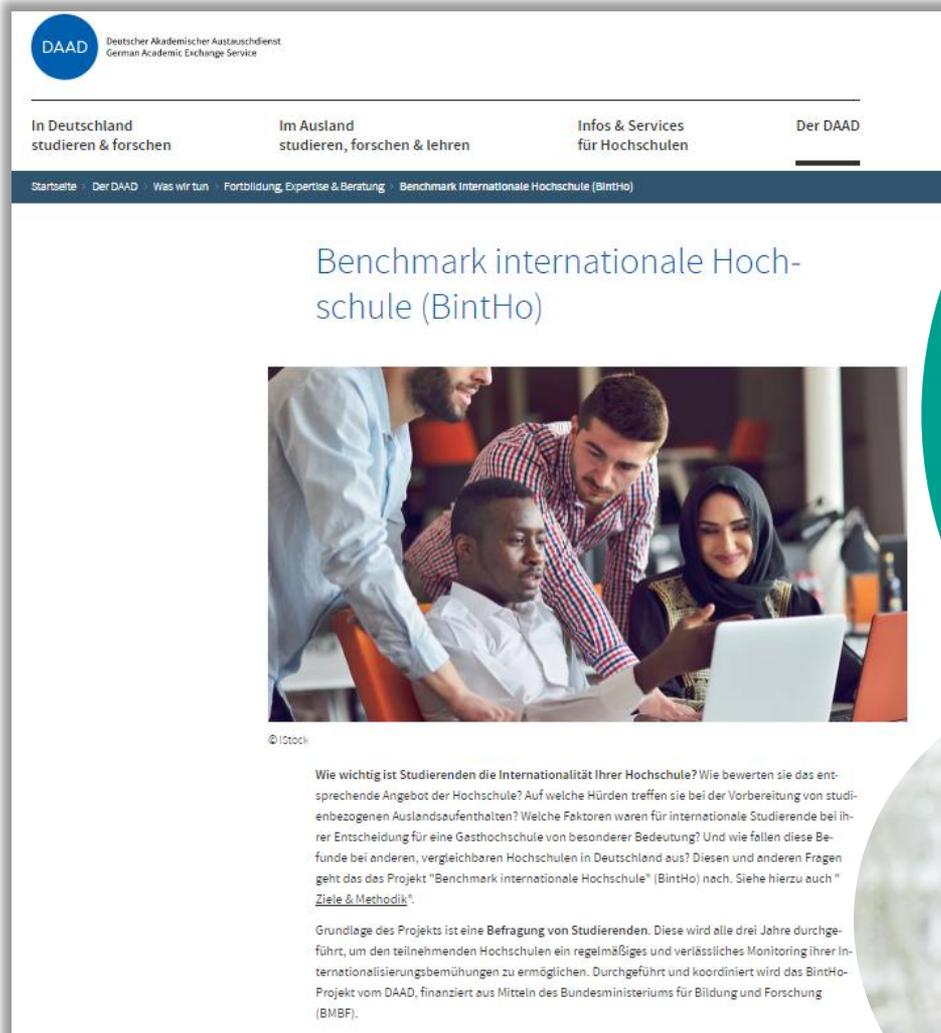
#### University Webpages Promoting Virtual Exchange - Examples

- [Florida International University](#)
- [DePaul University, Chicago, USA](#)
- [Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis](#)

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→ <https://tinyurl.com/48z2na9p>

# Further Information (in German): [www.daad.de/bintho](http://www.daad.de/bintho)



The screenshot shows the DAAD website header with the logo and navigation menu. The main content area features the title 'Benchmark internationale Hochschule (Bintho)' and a photograph of four diverse students (three men and one woman) gathered around a laptop, looking at the screen. Below the photo is a paragraph of German text describing the project's purpose and methodology.

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German Academic Exchange Service

In Deutschland studieren & forschen Im Ausland studieren, forschen & lehren Infos & Services für Hochschulen Der DAAD

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## Benchmark internationale Hochschule (Bintho)



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Wie wichtig ist Studierenden die Internationalität Ihrer Hochschule? Wie bewerten sie das entsprechende Angebot der Hochschule? Auf welche Hürden treffen sie bei der Vorbereitung von studienbezogenen Auslandsaufenthalten? Welche Faktoren waren für internationale Studierende bei ihrer Entscheidung für eine Gasthochschule von besonderer Bedeutung? Und wie fallen diese Befunde bei anderen, vergleichbaren Hochschulen in Deutschland aus? Diesen und anderen Fragen geht das Projekt "Benchmark internationale Hochschule" (Bintho) nach. Siehe hierzu auch "[Ziele & Methodik](#)".

Grundlage des Projekts ist eine Befragung von Studierenden. Diese wird alle drei Jahre durchgeführt, um den teilnehmenden Hochschulen ein regelmäßiges und verlässliches Monitoring ihrer Internationalisierungsbemühungen zu ermöglichen. Durchgeführt und koordiniert wird das Bintho-Projekt vom DAAD, finanziert aus Mitteln des Bundesministeriums für Bildung und Forschung (BMBF).

**If you have any questions about the Bintho project, please feel free to contact me!**

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