

# Plan for promoting academic stays and international mobility for learning purposes

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Ajuntament de  
Barcelona

# Diagnosis

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## International mobility figures prior to the Covid-19 pandemic

### Universities

**Barcelona, a preferred destination within the framework of international mobility for study purposes, with a volume of international students that used to reach 30,000 annually**

The Universities and Research Secretariat (SUR) has been publishing [student mobility figures](#) since 2014, based on the data provided by universities every year, invariably referring to the academic year two years before their publication. These figures have confirmed year after year that Catalonia, and Barcelona above all, is one of the preferred destinations within the various international mobility programmes. During the 2019-2020 academic year, the number of people arriving from universities outside Catalonia to study at a Catalan university within the framework of a mobility programme was 11,732, of whom 5,299 were under the Erasmus+ programme, the most important one quantitatively. The remaining students from outside Catalonia arrived under the umbrella of a large variety of mobility programmes which the Catalan universities have signed up to with numerous foreign universities; in the case of private universities, these particular programmes could account for an overall volume of students similar to or even greater than that under the Erasmus+ programme, hence why these universities often place greater emphasis on their own programmes. The universities represented on the Municipal Advisory Board for Universities (UB, UAB, UPC, UPF, UOC, URL, UIC and UAO CEU), with a large part of their activity in Barcelona, including the Bellaterra Campus, had a total of 10,778 visiting students from outside Catalonia (6,339 women and 4,107 men) during that academic year. Of these, 4,140 had come under the Erasmus+ programme (2,353 women and 1,592 men) and the rest, under the other programmes.

While these figures do not represent the entire university or research community, as they fail to include research and teaching staff, the SUR puts them at a higher number, describing Catalonia as “a magnet for international undergraduate, master’s-degree and doctoral students, with over 24,000 enrolled students from around the world”, and thereby ranked “as the fourth most internationalised face-to-face university system in the European higher education area (EHEA), after the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Austria, and with a percentage (12%) similar to the Netherlands (11%) and Denmark (10.8%)”. A similar overall figure can be found in a recent article in [El País](#) which asserts that foreign students represent 13% of the total of 170,000 individuals enrolled in Catalan universities, in other words, some 22,000 in number. .

Barcelona Centre Universitari (BCU), for its part, puts the number of students coming to Barcelona every year from outside the Spanish State at 35,403, an estimate also based on figures from the 2019-2020 academic year, taken from the universities’ annual reports (published on their respective websites). Of these, 28,148 are at public universities and 7,255 at private, distributed as follows:

<b>UB</b>	<b>12.000</b>	<b>URL</b>	<b>4.233</b>
<b>UAB</b>	<b>9.947</b>	<b>UVIC-UCC</b>	<b>2.449</b>
<b>UPC</b>	<b>4.325</b>	<b>UIC</b>	<b>388</b>
<b>UPF</b>	<b>1.876</b>	<b>UOA-CEU</b>	<b>185</b>

# Vocational training

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Ever since 1999, with the EU's implementation of various international mobility projects (the Leonardo da Vinci and subsequently the Erasmus+), vocational training students and graduates have been able to carry out training and work placements in institutions and companies in other EU countries. Given the lack of a Bologna Plan for harmonising the EU's various professional vocation systems, the international mobility adopted by VT students and graduates in the European area currently consists of carrying out professional placements in companies in other European countries. These work placements enable their academic recognition throughout the EU, given that professional placements are the only element shared by most vocational training programmes and professionalised studies in the various European states.

The BCN Vocational Training Foundation has been working in collaboration with the Xarxa FP Association of European Cities and more than 40 of Barcelona's vocational training centres since 2009 to enable students undertaking vocational training programmes and graduates from other European countries to do their vocational placements in Barcelona. Some 1,000 young Europeans are therefore estimated to complement their vocational studies through professional placements with companies in Barcelona. Around 200 educators and management teams at European vocational schools carry out teaching or learning stays at the city's vocational training centres.

The BCN Vocational Training Foundation works in collaboration with the Xarxa FP Association of Cities and 70 vocational training centres in Barcelona and its metropolitan area to also enable between 800 and 1,200 young people from Barcelona to do international placements in various EU states, in this case through the management of several Erasmus+ and Garantia Juvenil programmes.

# Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on international mobility

## Universities

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### **A notable drop in international student numbers during the 2020-2021 academic year, but with a much lower impact on public residences and halls of residence**

International student mobility was one of the first spaces where the effects of the pandemic were noted. At the start of June 2020, the Interuniversity Council of Catalonia (CIC), made up of the government and twelve Catalan universities, set the period starting from 1 June 2020 and finishing at the end of the 2020-2021 academic year as an exceptional stage for the Catalan university system, establishing several agreements and recommendations on the academic characteristics of the 2020-2021 academic year, adaptation of their teaching and international mobility. Students intending to embark on a stay at Catalonia's universities were advised to follow the guidelines of their home university and check the information on the mobility programmes on offer at Catalan universities for the 2020-2021 academic year, as some arranged their programmes for the first semester and others for the second.

Given that the data provided by universities on enrolment on international mobility programmes invariably correspond to the academic year from two years before the current one, no available data for the 2020-2021 academic year were available for accurately assessing the impact of the pandemic on the university community's international mobility when the plan was drafted. Despite that, the data on occupancy of student residences available at the start of the 2020-2021 academic year are also a good indicator for indirectly assessing the impact of the pandemic on international mobility. In this case, the CAMU Working Group on Infrastructures and Facilities made an assessment last October on the state of occupancy of Barcelona's public and private halls of residence, an assessment reflected in the Council's reports for 2020. In the case of halls of residence, the impact was not so significant, as they are facilities usually hired for entire academic years which offer a more traditional form of cohabitation, above all linked to students from the rest of the Spanish State. According to data provided by the UB, while 100% occupancy had been reached in previous years, the figure for its halls of residence that academic year were between 80% and 90%.

By contrast, the pandemic's impact on the occupancy of student residences was higher, especially those that were private or recently created, given that they were usually the option chosen by the foreign-national university community. Several cancellations were recorded at the start of the academic year, caused by the more or less sudden changes in teaching format. As expected, the blended or online formats which dominated that academic year, as well as a delayed enrolment period compared to previous years, contributed to the reduction in the residences' occupancy rates. According to data from the BCU, while RESA residences (at a more affordable price) were at 80% occupancy this September (at 74% in May), private residences such as XIOR, Livensa and The Student Hotel were between 15% and 20%. The figures here match the ones published by the newspaper [El País](#) also at the start of this academic year (24-10-2020), when "the arrival of foreign students at Catalan universities had dropped to 80%", a drop which, despite "having little financial effect, according to the campuses, is undermining plurality in classrooms as well as the expectations and experiences of students". In sum, the traditional, public or longer-term forms of accommodation (halls of residents, RESA etc.) have coped with the current situation much better than the private or recently created residences with stronger links to the foreign-national university community, demand for which fell considerably.

# Vocational training

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Given its work-based nature, international mobility in VT studies suffered a notable decline during the global Covid-19 pandemic. According to data from the Xarxa FP Association of European Cities, only 10% of the international mobilities planned for 2020 could be carried out. Bearing in mind the work-based and professionalisation nature of VT, the drop in international mobility is more notable than in other educational levels for the following reasons:

- ▶ The impossibility of European companies taking on young people in placements owing to falls or reductions in production or activity.
- ▶ Legal impossibility of European companies taking on young people in placements as they were immersed in a process of employment record regulation.
- ▶ Impossibility of European companies taking on young people in placements as they are carrying out their activity in teleworking mode.
- ▶ European Commission's restriction of Erasmus+ vocational training mobilities to remote or online format.

# International mobility planned for the 2021-2022 academic year

## Universities

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**The interest that international students have in coming to Barcelona has not declined despite the pandemic, given that numbers are expected to equal or exceed those for the 2019-2020 academic year**

According to a recent news item published in the newspaper [Ara](#) (16-5-2021), “the government recognises the effect that the virus has had on a trend that had been consolidating every year: the growing demand for studying outside Catalan universities. Even so, it asserts that ‘the rapid response from universities’ to the new formats, such as online teaching, has mitigated the impact that was initially expected to be greater. ‘The pandemic has affected the increase we were having in the university system, but had the universities not done anything there would probably have been almost no mobility’”, according to Josep Ribas, the Secretary-General of the Interuniversity Council of Catalonia. At the same time, given the current vaccination rate, young students are expected to be vaccinated at the start of the coming academic year, so they can channel their renewed keenness to study in Barcelona. In fact, that same news item states that “the main Catalan universities have received more applications than before the pandemic. [...] The Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) has received 1,510 applications for participation in its mobility programmes, a figure that is 19% above pre-pandemic levels (the number for the 2019-2020 academic year was 1,271, that is, there were 239 fewer applications). The figures are similar to those of other universities: the UPF expects the number of students enjoying an international stay in the coming academic year to be double this year’s figure (309) rising to 771. The increase at the Universitat de Barcelona (UB) is much less and 1,886 students are expected to study abroad compared to the 2019-20 academic year, when the number was 1,883, three fewer”. In that respect, while the figures for occupancy of halls of residence and student residences for the 2021-2022 academic year will not be known until the end of July, the expectation is a proportion similar to that of the 2019-2020 academic year, given the number of students this year who have planned to go on an exchange in the coming year is similar to or higher than this year. With regard to teaching formats and the wait for guidelines from the Catalan Ministry of Health on face-to-face classes and classroom capacities, universities are aiming to resume their face-to-face format, if not at 100%, then at least at a higher percentage than the current one (50%-70%). In the case of the UOC, which is naturally opting for a blended format, it is taking on a relatively large number of foreign-national researchers.

# Vocational training

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The international mobility figures for the coming 2021-2022 academic year in vocational training are expected to return to the levels of the 2019-20 academic year. The following legal and operational measures, then, have been taken in order to resume international stays for VT students:

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## Legal measures

The European Commission has extended the various projects managed under the Erasmus+ by 12 months so that the young people who were unable to carry out an international stay because of the Covid-19 pandemic can do their international placement period as vocational-training graduates until May 2022.

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## Operational scope

According to data from the Xarxa FP association of European cities, from September 2021 on, all European cities will be able to accept incoming students from Barcelona (and vice versa) at their institutions and companies (with the exception of Finland's cities, which will do so as of October).

# Measures for promoting International Mobility

## Universities

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Barcelona's attraction as a destination for reading higher studies is acknowledged by all the city's universities, as that alone brings in a very large volume of students. For example, the BarcelonaTech brand, created by the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, came about from stating the main attraction of these universities for foreign nationals at international higher education fairs, the names of which make explicit reference to the city. Despite that, there is a consensus that Barcelona needs to avoid having an image as a city exclusively identified with leisure, associated above all with youth tourism and which distorts its potential as a university city and as a place for living and developing professionally.

The proposal for promoting academic stays and international mobility for learning purposes is based on four measures, understood as parts of the same strategy:

- ▶ Launching a campaign to attract international students;
- ▶ Initiatives for improving affordable accommodation;
- ▶ Creating an office for assisting the international university community;
- ▶ Holding a start-of-year welcoming event.

All four proposals, which are listed and contextualised below, have their precedents in Barcelona and other international university cities which guarantee their suitability and are also measures which largely have initiatives already geared in that direction, promoted by or with the participation of Barcelona City Council.



## 01. A campaign to attract international students

### **A campaign through social networks, divided up according to various international student profiles**

On the one hand, it needs to target young students within the framework of traditional mobility, connected to the Erasmus+ programme, but also through the diverse range of mobility programmes specific to each university. On the other hand, it needs to target graduates who are thinking of doing a master's degree or doctorate abroad. As a precedent, the Area of Economy, Resources and Economic Promotion at the City Council, working jointly with the BCU, launched a campaign through social networks during the autumn of 2020, which had a considerable impact, according to a report compiled by ESADE Creapolis, thanks largely to the flow resulting from messages shared internally by the international university community. That campaign was targeted above all at young people from the European area who might have been weighing up the option of doing a postgraduate degree outside their country, given that, unlike the master's-degree offers, there were still few undergraduate degrees taught wholly in English on offer. At present, according to information provided by the BCU, a total of 16 undergraduate degrees in English are offered by public universities (UB 5, UAB 4, UPC 3 and UPF 4) and 2 by the URL, (none are on offer at the other private universities).

On the other hand, another important sector, together with the mobility programmes, consists of foreign degree-seeking students. This young profile is especially highly rated by universities not just for the added value it represents, in generating more stable and longer-lasting synergies between local and foreign students, but also for the fact that it can help to make up for the steady levelling off of internal demand as a result of population ageing. For this profile, it is a priority that undergraduate studies, particularly those in the area of technology and business studies, are offered wholly or mostly in English, an adaptation currently carried out unevenly in the city's universities. That is why universities that are currently offering undergraduate degrees wholly in English have more capacity for attracting students in this field. As an example, the last decade has seen the URL increase its own number of students (not mobility students), thanks to international undergraduate-degree students. The current trend, then, indicates a drop in the percentage of Europe-related mobility in favour of mobility relating to North America or Asia, a trend requiring considerable effort from the competent authority in simplifying and speeding up the red tape for resident permits as well as reflection from universities on the possibilities of adapting undergraduate studies to English or attending to cultural diversity.

For all segments, but particularly in relation to young graduates, the campaign needs to emphasise Barcelona's potential as a city for studying in, not just because of its powerful and unified university system but also because of its quality of life and possibilities for developing professional careers in various fields. Here we should note the city's potential in the technological and digital fields which can be seen, for instance, in the fact that Barcelona is the region of Southern Europe with the most startups, and the possibilities it also offers in the field of science — both in research, as it is ranks fourth in EU scientific publications, according to the Science Cities index of the journal Nature, and in transfer of knowledge to enterprises.

## 02. Flexible and affordable accommodation

### **Providing places in residences at an affordable price and for short- and medium-term stays**

Guaranteeing fair access to university-community accommodation is considered essential. The average price for places in halls of residence and, above all, student residences (public and private) is very high and there are not enough places at affordable prices. The City Council has an urban-planning reform in place which will affect the new residences located on facility-classed land, including residences that are current at the planning or construction stage. This reform is part of a determined effort being made by the City Council to create a pool of residence places at affordable prices, whether public or state assisted at public-sector prices (well below average prices), to be awarded under criteria established by the Department of Science and Universities, including rent levels, functional diversity and special educational needs. Highly rated by universities, this municipal initiative intends to become a tool for covering not just the existing demand for accommodation at affordable prices but also for contributing indirectly to a drop in prices for places at private residences. While there may be a quantitative limit to this pool in the short and medium term, the City Council is clearly aiming to make progress in improving affordable housing for the visiting and international university community.

On the other hand, options would need to be sought to bring flexibility to offers, providing accommodation in residences for periods shorter than an academic year, while always guaranteeing that their use is effectively allocated to the university community. Although the Erasmus+ programme does not provide for online teaching, the gradual promotion of blended mobility, involving physical mobility for periods of under two months combined with online mobility, does make it necessary for students to have accommodation for a few months. Note too the importance of summer schools, not just for their growing number of participants and the positive impact they are having on Barcelona's university system, but also for their possibilities as a tool for attracting future undergraduate, master's-degree and doctoral students. It is precisely in the framework of these summer schools, which involve short stays, that foreign students are finding more difficulties gaining access to affordable accommodation.

### 03. An office for assisting the international university community

#### **An office for assisting the international university and research community which unifies all the information and support services available for foreign students**

The proposal is to create an office or service for assisting the international university community which unifies all the information available on studies, procedures and accommodation, among other things, offering it as comprehensively and simply as possible, putting special emphasis on procedures for people from countries outside the Schengen Area. Note here the case of UCLA (California), which was already meeting all the basic needs of students from abroad through a centralised system and by telephone, not just in enrolments and resident permits but also in accommodation and upkeep, among other things. Another similar international benchmark, [Study Buenos Aires](#) provides a welcome kit that includes special rates for accommodation, discounts on public transport and at language schools, a SIM card and scholarships. The possibilities of offering some of these facilities should also be assessed within the framework of this second measure.

The [Barcelona International Welcome Desk](#), a face-to-face and online office run in close collaboration with the BCU, is to be operational within the coming months, in line with this measure and emulating other university cities. This body has centralised and developed a good part of the office's own tasks, attending in a personalised way to the university community's needs, particularly in relation to accommodation, making an accommodation pool available that is always open, translated versions of the necessary documents in each case and legal protection in the face of malpractice, as well as useful information on the city, featured above all in its Talent Guide.

In the case of foreign undergraduate students, one of the main difficulties, which tops even access to accommodation at affordable prices and which foreign students aiming to do an entire undergraduate degree in Barcelona are faced with, is the complex red tape for obtaining residence permits or visas (and even in arranging a prior appointment for obtaining a foreign-national identification number (NIE) or the lack of translated versions of some of the documents). Note here the various requests that have arrived under the Prometheus programme from young foreigner nationals, resident in Barcelona or in non-EU countries, asking for advice on enrolling at one of Barcelona's universities. This demonstrates the existing demand as well as the serious difficulties in dealing with the necessary procedures or even in obtaining the necessary information. Ways therefore have to be found for simplifying procedures, providing advice at origin and helping universities to have a more fluid communication with the competent authority or administration (Government Subdelegation to Barcelona, embassies, consulates etc.) It was from 2010 to 2017, roughly, that AGAUR led a monitoring group with all the universities to help to periodically resolve difficulties relating to cases in progress. There is currently a need to reactivate this joint and systematic work through a cross-cutting communication space, with a problem-solving capacity.

## 04. Welcoming event

**A welcoming event for the international university community with presentations, workshops and tours linked to the city's historical and cultural heritage and scientific network.**

Following examples of other Spanish and European cities, the proposal is for a welcoming event for the international university and research community, located in an iconic venue in the city. Similar events had been held in the 2000s at the Palau de Pedralbes, but they failed to be sufficiently efficient in cost or impact. The last few years have seen the city playing host to the [Barcelona International Community Day](#), which could be an appropriate framework for incorporating their welcoming into the university and research community, without the need to duplicate efforts. Previous editions have noted the attendance of international students and their active participation in different workshops. In this case, the welcoming event could include workshops, exhibitions or tours linked to the scientific network of the city of science, as well as other activities for discovering Barcelona which, besides the more tourist-focused itineraries, incorporate a historical, cultural and social tour of the city to offer a more complete and richer view of it.

# Vocational Training

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## 01. Promoting the BCN Vocational Training Foundation

Barcelona City Council has been running the BCN Vocational Training Foundation since 2007, an organisation tasked with the socio-economic development of Barcelona and its Metropolitan Area based on the promotion of relations between vocational training and the economic and social environment, boosting suitable training that is compatible with the needs of the productive system and facilitating the student's transition to the labour market and full integration through projects and specific initiatives aimed at companies and institutions, as well as training centres. One of the Foundation's strategic goals is to consolidate Barcelona and the AMB as an area open to the world by managing mobility initiatives for young people and VT teachers; as well as other international projects that generate knowledge in the sector.

The BCN Vocational Training Foundation is presently the institution that manages the most international mobility scholarships in Catalonia, after the Catalan Ministry of Education and is a benchmark for Barcelona's vocational training centres in managing European projects and a benchmark in the Spanish State in managing the Erasmus+ programme. Looking ahead to the coming 2021-2022 academic year, it has had the following international mobility projects approved by the European Commission:

- ▶ **Erasmus+ for students and graduates in higher vocational training.** A project that enables students and graduates in higher vocational training cycles to carry out international placements in EU companies.
- ▶ **Erasmus+ for students and graduates in vocational training.** A project that enables students and graduates in intermediate vocational training cycles to carry out international placements in EU companies.
- ▶ **Erasmus+ for students and graduates in basic vocational training (PFI).** Social- and employment-inclusion project that enables students of initial-training programmes to carry out international placements in EU companies.
- ▶ **TLN Mobility and Special Project (Youth Guarantee Programme).** Projects that enable students and graduates in vocational training cycles to carry out international placements in EU companies.

## **02. Promoting the Xarxa FP Association of European Cities**

Barcelona City Council has been running and leading the European cities vocational training network in the European area since 1999. The association brings together 38 cities from 16 EU states with the main aim of promoting the internationalisation of vocational training on local and EU levels. Between 800 and 1,000 young people carry out placements in EU companies every year, thanks to the institution. The Xarxa FP has become one of the benchmark institutions for the European Commission in the management of international mobility in vocational training, with the various work groups taking part in the design and implementation of the Erasmus+ or international mobility programmes between the EU and the rest of the world.

## **03. Incorporation of VT youth into existing higher-education networks**

The proposal is for the incorporation of European vocational-training students carrying out international mobilities in Barcelona into the existing networks currently aimed at university students. Although the entire operational and professional part of the international VT stays in Barcelona are helped and covered by the BCN Vocational Training Foundation, it would be a positive development for students newly arrived in the city to be able to count on the support of institutions such as the BCU (Barcelona University Centre) seeking advice and affordable accommodation, as well as in the various campaigns for attracting students or in the welcoming events suggested in this plan.

**Aquest pla és fruit de la col·laboració de:**

- **Barcelona Ciència i Universitats**
- **Consell Assessor Municipal d'Universitats**
- **Barcelona Centre Universitari**
- **Consell de la Formació Professional de Barcelona**
- **Consorti d'Educació de Barcelona**
- **Fundació BCN Formació Professional**