WP2/2.1 Final Report - Focus Groups Results

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1. Introduction

The following document introduces the results of the Focus Groups conducted in Italy, Greece, and the Netherlands with the aim of obtaining insights into the experiences and perspectives of various stakeholders.

2. The MODES Project

The MODES project aims to reinforce the international and foreign students' learning experiences by equipping and boosting the HEI lecturers' skills to create inclusive classrooms. To achieve this, lecturers will have access to a Methodological Guide for teaching in international settings. An International Skills Curriculum developed by the project will foster the inclusivity of higher education on a systemic level.

The MODES vision is to improve the learning experience of foreign students by addressing the problem of "culture shock" that many of these international students face, and that often limits the quality of their international experiences.

The skills that the professors should cultivate in order to be able to consider and identify the needs of their students, based on these aspects are common throughout Europe.

3. Scope of WP2/2.1

In May 2023, we conducted field research (Focus Groups) in Italy, Greece, and Leiden with the purpose of identifying the specific challenges that teachers face when entering an international learning environment.

4. Focus Group Results

The questions below are based on the template provided by Momentum Consulting in the context of MODES WP 2 Activity 2.1 concerning the conduction of field research with staff involved with international students.

1. Could you please share with us your age, place of work and years in practice? What gender do you identify yourself as?

ITALY – LCU

Within the framework of the MODES project conducted in the Italian context, a specific research initiative was undertaken, entailing the conduction of a meticulously organized focus group session. This session involved the active participation and engagement of a group comprising nine Higher Education Institution (HEI) actors, characterized by a gender composition consisting of seven females and two males.

GREECE – MC

The participants identify themselves with their biological gender (7 females and 1 male), their ages vary between 36 and 52 years old. All work at Metropolitan College and one works, also at the University of Crete and their years in practice vary between 10 to 30 years.

NETHERLANDS – ULEI

The focus group was attended and described by five prominent members of the IT department of the University of Leiden. The roles played by participants vary; there are associate professors, assistant professors, and even a director of education for master's programs. They have significant experience in higher education, serving as study consultants, researchers, and educators, with a specific emphasis on internationalization and collaboration with China. The average work experience is 10 years.

2. What is your role within your institution/academy, which brings you into contact with international students?

ITALY – LCU

The individuals who make up the focus group cover a wide range of roles, including educators, psychologists, academic advisors, administrative staff, and international student office representatives. The average age of participants is 30, while their working experience varies from 3 to 5 years.

GREECE – MC

All the participants are teacher within their academy.

NETHERLANDS – ULEI

See answer to Q1.

3. Approximately, how many international students have your institution per academic year?

ITALY – LCU

The participants involved work at the Link Campus University (LCU) and the Rome City Institute (RCI). These distinguished institutions boast a consistent enrollment of approximately 120 international students annually, underscoring their commitment to fostering a globally diverse and enriching academic environment.

GREECE – MC

All the participants agreed that there is a small number of international students, approximately 1-2 persons per department at undergraduate level, while at postgraduate and doctoral level the number increases up to 5%. Only one person said that there are about 30-35% per year where the courses are in English, however, mostly in postgraduate and PhD levels.

NETHERLANDS – ULEI

The average number of international students in the various programs mentioned is as follows:

- In the Bachelor of Computer Science, there are only a few international students.

- In the international Bachelor of Data Science and artificial intelligence, there are 80 to 100 international students.

- In the master course, approximately 50% of the students are international, which is around 25 students.

- In the bachelor course, there are approximately 15 international students.

- In the three master programs offered by the computer science department, there are approximately 300 international students.

- At the Ph.D. level, 70% of the students who defended their thesis in the last year are international.

On average, more than 50% of the students attending the various courses are international.

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4. *Does your university/institution offer special services to international students? For example, guidance on how to navigate public services etc.*

ITALY – LCU

Both the Link Campus University (LCU) and the Rome City Institute (RCI) are dedicated to enhancing the experience of international students studying abroad by providing an array of specialized services. In particular, RCI aims to ensure a smooth transition for students starting their academic journey in Rome.

GREECE – MC

In University of Crete there is a service which is part of the Erasmus programs and but also helps students who come to study in the country outside Erasmus. However, in general the assistance is limited as it is focused on helping with services within the university, and they usually refer international students to local professors or students for further help with services outside the institution (such as health structures, or administrative issues).

NETHERLANDS – ULEI

Yes, in our university, there are specific services for international students. These services include a dedicated international student study advisor and a "Warm welcome service" that provides assistance with visas, address registration, housing, and insurance. International students can also participate in a dedicated Introduction week, and there are various social media channels dedicated to them. Additionally, several staff members work on internationalization at both the research and education levels. At the faculty level, we facilitate the organization of student associations, and there are other services like mentoring and coaching available, primarily at the institute level.

5. *If yes, which services does your institution offer?*

GREECE – MC

However, in general the assistance is limited as it is focused on helping with services within the university, and they usually refer international students to local professors or students for further help with services outside the institution (such as health structures, or administrative issues).

NETHERLANDS – ULEI

See answer to Q4.

ITALY - LCU

They organize comprehensive presentations at the beginning of the academic year, offering invaluable insights into the city's various modes of transportation, a general orientation about Rome, essential cultural etiquettes such as appropriate behaviour at local establishments, and safety precautions. Given the prevalent enrolment of students from the United States, RCI caters to their needs and preferences, elucidating what they can order at bars and providing guidance on respectful interactions with the local populace. Additionally, RCI facilitates transportation services for excursions beyond Rome, extending their assistance in exploring other Italian cities like Milan and Napoli.

Moreover, both institutions facilitate student housing arrangements, ensuring a smooth transition for those relocating to Italy. LCU appoints academic advisors, especially for undergraduate students, to help them acclimate to the Italian academic system, which may significantly differ from their own. The institutions prioritize personal attention and engagement with each student, offering tailored guidance on study plans, semester exams, academic calendars, website navigation, and other essential aspects of the academic landscape. RCI's commitment to student welfare extends beyond the initial orientation, with ongoing support and communication throughout the students' Italian academic experience. Actively seeking and valuing student feedback, RCI consistently strives to improve its services and adapt to evolving student needs. Additionally, RCI assists students in obtaining the necessary visas for their journey to Italy.

LCU, on the other hand, endeavours to equip students with comprehensive pre-departure information through a detailed guide, providing vital information well in advance of their commitment to study. They meticulously plan and organize travel arrangements prior to the students' arrival, ensuring a seamless integration into the university community. Both institutions exemplify a dedication to ensuring that international students have a well-supported and enriching academic and cultural experience during their time in Italy.

GREECE – MC

All participants agreed that it would be very important for the universities to have a service that informs students not only about issues within the university but also about issues outside the university. From finding a home to information on health structures.

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6. *How would you rank these services in terms of importance for making the transition of international students smoother? (From least important to most important). Are some services considered as high priority from you?*

ITALY – LCU

Each of these services holds significant value in facilitating the smooth transition and experience for the students. However, the consensus among the participants, particularly concerning non-European Union (EU) students, is that the foremost crucial service is ensuring the issuance of the visa, commonly known as "permesso di soggiorno," prior to their arrival in Italy. The significance of this service is amplified by the complexities and bureaucratic hurdles characteristic of the Italian administrative processes.

Additionally, another set of high-priority services revolves around the provision of various types of insurance, a factor intrinsically linked to the overall cost and quality of the international sojourn, with a particular emphasis on health insurance and associated matters. These insurance services are viewed as indispensable in mitigating potential risks and challenges during the students' time abroad.

GREECE – MC

It's a little above average. Depending on the year there is a different response. The years in which there is funding to maintain this office, as it is not funded by the state but by funded programs, the satisfaction is higher as there is a larger group of people who are willing to help. But when there is no funding, in essence the office is not functioning. So, the satisfaction is low and even more dissatisfied were the professors, who had neither the time nor the knowledge to serve all the students who asked for different kinds of information.

It would be very important to have a service that would inform students not only about issues within the university but also about issues outside the university such as how to navigate in public services, health structures, information about residence permits, etc.

They talked about their own experience as international students, and all agreed that there should be an international student office to help with everything from simple living issues (e.g. getting a bus pass) to more complicated bureaucratic issues.

The existence of such an office was considered by all to be a high priority.

NETHERLANDS – ULEI

The importance of services for international students' transition is challenging to gauge due to limited awareness of specific university offerings. Notably, having an international study advisor is key for individual support. The overall significance lies in educational structure, easing differences, providing practical information, and psychological support, often accessible to all students. From the answers of the participants in the focus group, it is evident that both practical and psychological assistance are equally

crucial. The introduction week fosters student connections and practical experiences. Crucial services encompass welcome and introduction programs, housing assistance, and effective social integration, with a need for equitable access for international students compared to domestic counterparts.

7. On a scale from 1 (least important) to 5 (most important) how would you rate the following services to international students

ITALY – LCU

a.	**Activities to learn about the institution**	**5**, very important
b.	**Weekly peer-to-peer discussions between international students and teachers/professors**	5, very important. For the participants it depends also on the kind of international student, if it is EU or non-EU (regarding Erasmus), depends on the background and their home institutions
c.	**Mentor programs: Pairing local and senior students with 1 st -year international students**	**3-5**, depends on the length of the stay of the students. If possible, is considered important, as is actually helpful and approachable for new students instead of constantly contact the staff of the international offices. Some participants think that not everything should be provided to the student in order to provide them the opportunity to experience on their own. One of the participants thinks it would be useful to make some international students with more experience be part of the international department office to help the new abroad students.
d.	**Providing a tailored schedule to international students for lectures and exams**	**5**, very important
e.	**Community services to bring in contact international students with the local community**	**4-5**, important but still needs more implementation. There are some activities that are done (as cooking classes), but not regarding specifically the community which would be very interesting for sure for the students. Not to be mandatory otherwise won't be useful. The most important thing should be connected international students with the local ones in this framework.
f.	**Lessons to learn the language**	5, very important. Useful also to push the students to have a field experience, taking them out as a whole and encouraging them to learn by doing. It might happen that students don't sign up to the offer of the language lessons. Another thing that is suggested is to not only teach the local language to the abroad students, but also to teach English or another language to the local students and make them work together. There is disagreement about

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	the compulsory nature of these services between participants. For the participants it is important to not make distinction between the nature of the students in the universities program, events and classes, and not divide some services and experiences between local and international students. Make feel all the students as belonging to one common unique community.

GREECE – MC

a.	**Activities to learn about the institution**	All agreed on **4**
b.	**Weekly peer-to-peer discussions between international students and teachers/professors**	All agreed on **4-5**
c.	**Mentor programs: Pairing local and senior students with 1 st -year international students**	All agreed on **5** and if there was a larger number, they would agree on it
d.	**Providing a tailored schedule to international students for lectures and exams**	All agreed on **4-5**
e.	**Community services to bring in contact international students with the local community**	All agreed on **5** and if there was a larger number, they would agree on it
f.	**Lessons to learn the language**	All agreed to **3** and that it would be more important only if it was a long-term stay in the country

NETHERLANDS – ULEI

a.	**Activities to learn about the institution**	**4-5**
b.	**Weekly peer-to-peer discussions between international students and teachers/professors**	From **2** to **4**
c.	**Mentor programs: Pairing local and senior students with 1 st -year international students**	**4-5**
d.	**Providing a tailored schedule to international students for lectures and exams**	From **1** to **3.** All participants agree that a tailored schedule for international students different than the one for Dutch student does not actively work towards internationalization, on the contrary, it would arm and goes towards segregation

e. Community services to bring in contact international students with the local community	From **2** to **5.** Community services are not a suited way to bring students into contact with the local community, it is however important that they come into contact with the local environment. This could be done by them participating in study and student associations that are not specifically targeted to internationals but include all students.
f. Lessons to learn the language	**3-4.** While one should offer Dutch lessons they are not necessarily seen as very useful, because one does not learn a language through lessons but by practice and this is difficult in the Netherlands since everyone speaks English. In the end, this depends on the situation and whether it is needed.

Examination of data; Graphics

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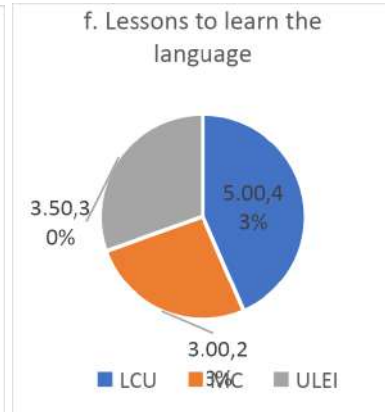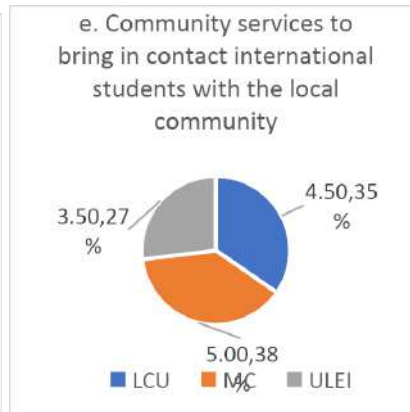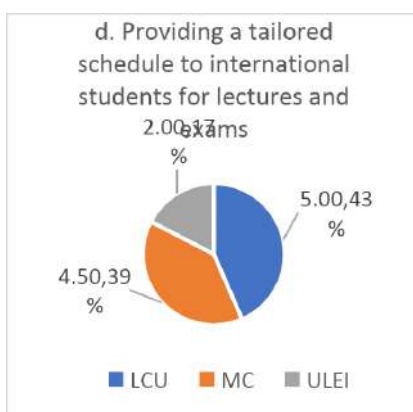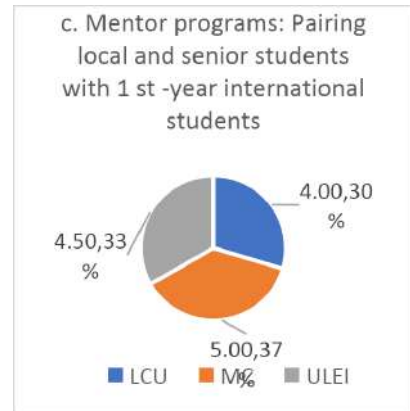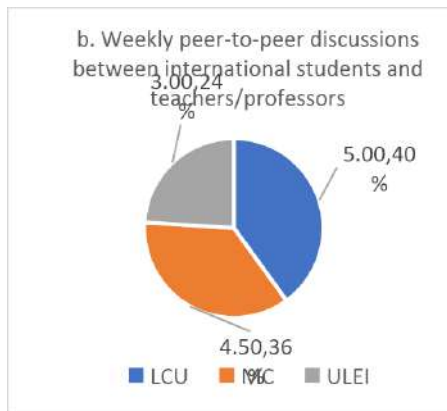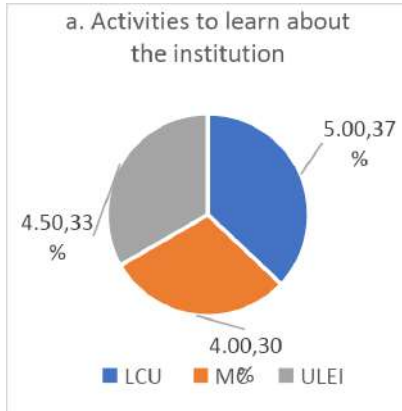
8. *Which services (that are not listed above) do you think that should be adopted by universities/institutions to address the needs of International Students?*

ITALY - LCU

Participants express the belief that the integration of job prospects for international students is vital. Opportunities can manifest themselves as mentoring roles, positions as assistant professors, or involvement within the university's international office, as mentioned above. In addition, it is recommended to improve language exchange events between students and organize group excursions, such as trips to various cities or visits to museums, favoring a sense of community and cultural enrichment among different groups of students.

GREECE – MC

Many views were expressed on this question. These are summarizing as follows:

1. A first contact of 1st year students with international students of older years would help them feel more comfortable. Maybe through student organizations.

2. Pre-departure orientation. Person who directs studenta coming to university for the 1st time and gives them all the information they need targeted according to their culture. For example, what they will encounter on campus, services related to airport pick up and transportation in general. Inclusion from different cultures through targeted events to make the integration of international students smoother in order to have blending and integration.

3. Training to local students on how they can manage interculturality and how they can encourage and empower their international peers.

4. Organization of team building or icebreaker type events with elements of each student's culture.

5. Service that supports integration initiatives of international students with the help of local students.

6. The curriculum should be in English, enhancing the academic English of international students.

7. It should be a voluntary work of the students to help the international students through which their student profile will be evaluated in terms of volunteerism and maybe receive some credits.

8. A given terminology per course in the language of each international student in addition to the main language of the course which must be English.

9. A service that will support on the financial aiding part, e.g. help them on choices that lead them to scholarships.

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10. There should be a possibility through employment agencies to support international students who wish to work

11. Having a clear guidance to health services.

12. Service within the university that checks off students' mentality.

13. Teacher training so that they can manage the culture part and the specifics of each nationality. An example was given was the difficulty of understanding through the name what gender was being referred to.

14. It would be good to record the gender that someone self-identifies as well as the address that a student prefers.

15. Student training so that they can manage the culture part and the specifics of each ethnicity

16. Instructions in digital format of guidelines for students.

17. Exams with different time or in separate rooms where they will be tested either in their language or in English.

NETHERLANDS – ULEI

The key points raised by participants revolve around several crucial services for international students:

1. Housing Assistance: Participants emphasize the need for more available student housing, highlighting the university's responsibility in this regard, given the recruitment of international students. This is a significant concern for international students.

2. Centralized Support: A central point of contact for all aspects of starting studies is recommended to streamline the practicalities of beginning academic life.

3. Orientation and Cultural Understanding: Providing international students with an understanding of how things work in the Netherlands, typically offered during the Introduction Week and through mentorship, is seen as essential for a smoother transition.

4. Psychological Support: Acknowledging the psychological aspect of the transition, participants highlight the importance of services for emotional well-being.

5. Legal and Financial Guidance: Services related to legal and financial matters are crucial to address common sources of worry among international students.

6. Introduction Week: The Introduction Week for international students is valued for helping them get to know their peers, the city, and the university, fostering a sense of belonging.

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7. Central Service Desk: Participants suggest the establishment of a central service desk at the faculty level to provide convenient access to essential information and support.

9. How much do you think the situation has changed during the last 5-7 years regarding the welcoming and smooth integration of International Students to your institution.

ITALY - LCU

According to the participants, the change in the situation regarding the integration of International Students that has occurred in recent years depends on the institution, in fact some of them may register an improvement. Others may experience a slower improvement, but this depends mainly on the international footprint of the university/institution itself. As mentioned above, there must be an effort by the institution to be more attractive to international students and enhance the sense of community unique to each other and local students.

GREECE – MC

All agreed that it hasn't changed at all.

NETHERLANDS – ULEI

The housing situation in the Netherlands has become increasingly challenging, and this hasn't had a positive impact. The growing number of international students, on the other hand, has somewhat alleviated the situation. The larger international community makes these students feel more included and part of a group they can relate to.

However, there are mixed opinions on the overall situation. Some participants express uncertainty about the exact impact, while others point out that COVID-19 had a substantial negative effect. Despite this, they generally consider the situation quite good outside of pandemic-related issues.

The stability in the housing situation may be attributed to a broader trend of nationalism in the country. While housing problems have intensified in recent years, offering programs in English has helped international students feel more welcomed.

10. Is the integration and/or the decrease/increase of international students' dropout an important issue in the administrative talks of your institution? If yes in what way and how they react to new inputs?

ITALY - LCU

As for the previous question, it depends on the institution. There is constant commitment and dialogue on the part of the institution because this topic is considered very significant, especially in light of the aspirations of universities for internationalization and their corresponding ranking goals. However, despite a substantial contribution, there is a potential risk that this issue will gradually lose its priority on the institutional agenda.

GREECE – MC

All agreed that efforts are being made to increase the inputs of international students, but they are still in their early stages. For it to mature, discussions will need to take place at many levels, such as those mentioned above.

NETHERLANDS - ULEI

At present, the issue of potential dropouts among our international bachelor students is not a pressing concern, primarily because these students have only recently commenced their studies. However, it's acknowledged that this may become a more prominent issue in the years to come. The question itself raises the notion of dropout, which isn't necessarily a general expectation. Nevertheless, early proactive communication regarding the suitability of their chosen program is deemed crucial, ideally before the students even embark on their academic journey. In our institution, we employ a mandatory matching test for this purpose, aiding students in making informed decisions about their educational path.

The current situation hasn't presented a significantly higher dropout rate for international students compared to national students, as the overall student population is on the rise.

While there isn't a specific focus on dropout prevention for international students at the moment, the attention and consideration being given to their unique needs are seen as a positive step.

However, with the increasing number of international students, there's an active discussion taking place, particularly among program directors, about improving the quality and timeliness of information provided to prospective students. The goal is to ensure that international students have accurate expectations about their studies before relocating to Leiden, minimizing the risk of incorrect assumptions.

Ultimately, the institution's management recognizes the relevance of establishing effective instruments to monitor and support the international student population, aligning their experiences with the institution's educational goals.

11. *In your work in close contact with international students, how relevant is the issue of gender and what special activities/attention does it require from your department?*

ITALY - LCU

The participants underscore the prevalent presence of male students within the student body. n considering gender disparities, they advocate for giving additional attention to female students when discussing security concerns related to the host city. However, achieving a gender balance among office employees may not be necessary to effectively address student concerns; instead, the focal point for employees is possessing sensitivity and awareness to cater to the distinct needs of various genders. While the participants acknowledge a lack of experience with non-binary students thus far, they underscore the importance for the staff to possess the necessary sensitivity to understand and address issues and requirements pertinent to non-binary individuals. Furthermore, they stress the need to enhance awareness among staff regarding approaching and supporting non-binary students, considering this topic as currently underrated.

GREECE - MC

Monitoring is needed to ensure that there are no cases of non-acceptance. Equal opportunities must be given to all regardless of gender or nationality.

Make provision for gender neutral or binary, for example in the rooms they are entered in the university residence hall.

NETHERLANDS – ULEI

Note of coordinator: this question has been added after the focus group took place. As such it was not discussed in the focus group. Here the answer from the focus group coordinator:

Gender inclusivity and diversity, in general, are very relevant issues in our department, but not particularly related to international students. Except for a mandatory course on awareness of cultural diversity available for all our master's students, the department has installed a diversity committee that serves as a listening organ for all diversity and gender-related problems picked up by the staff and/or students and organizes events to promote gender diversity and
inclusivity.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the WP2/2.1 Final Report on Focus Groups Results highlights several important findings related to international students' experiences and integration in higher education institutions. The MODES Project aims to enhance the learning experiences of international students and improve the inclusivity of higher education. The focus group results from Italy, Greece, and Leiden shed light on various aspects of international student life and the challenges they face.

The report reveals that universities and institutions have made efforts to improve the integration of international students. They offer a range of services, including orientation, mentorship programs, language lessons, and assistance with practical matters. However, the availability and effectiveness of these services vary, and there is room for improvement, particularly in providing support for students outside the university context.

The focus group discussions also emphasize the importance of addressing the specific needs of international students. In particular, issues related to gender and non-binary students are recognized as relevant and require greater awareness and sensitivity among staff. The report suggests the need for more gender-inclusive policies and accommodations, as well as support for non-binary individuals.

Furthermore, the report highlights the increasing importance of internationalization in higher education institutions, with universities actively working to attract and support international students. However, the integration and dropout rates of international students remain a concern in administrative discussions, and proactive measures are required to ensure their academic success.

In summary, the report provides valuable insights into the experiences of international students and the efforts made by institutions to improve their integration. It underscores the importance of addressing the specific needs of these students, including gender-related issues, and highlights the ongoing commitment to enhancing internationalization in higher education.