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BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN ERASMUS+ MOBILITIES: WHO ARE THESE STUDENTS AND WHAT ARE THEIR NEEDS ?

This Storytelling Report is part of the Inclusion+ project (2023–2026), which aims to promote equity and accessibility for students with disabilities and students with caring responsibilities in international mobility programs. As part of the project's activities, the Inclusion+ team organized several Dialogue Forums in **Portugal**, **Lithuania**, **Finland**, and **Turkey**, providing student groups with the opportunity to share their experiences, discuss challenges, and propose solutions based on their mobility journeys. This report serves as a tool to document and analyze these students' narratives, transforming them into actionable insights that can inform policymakers, institutions, and mobility program administrators.



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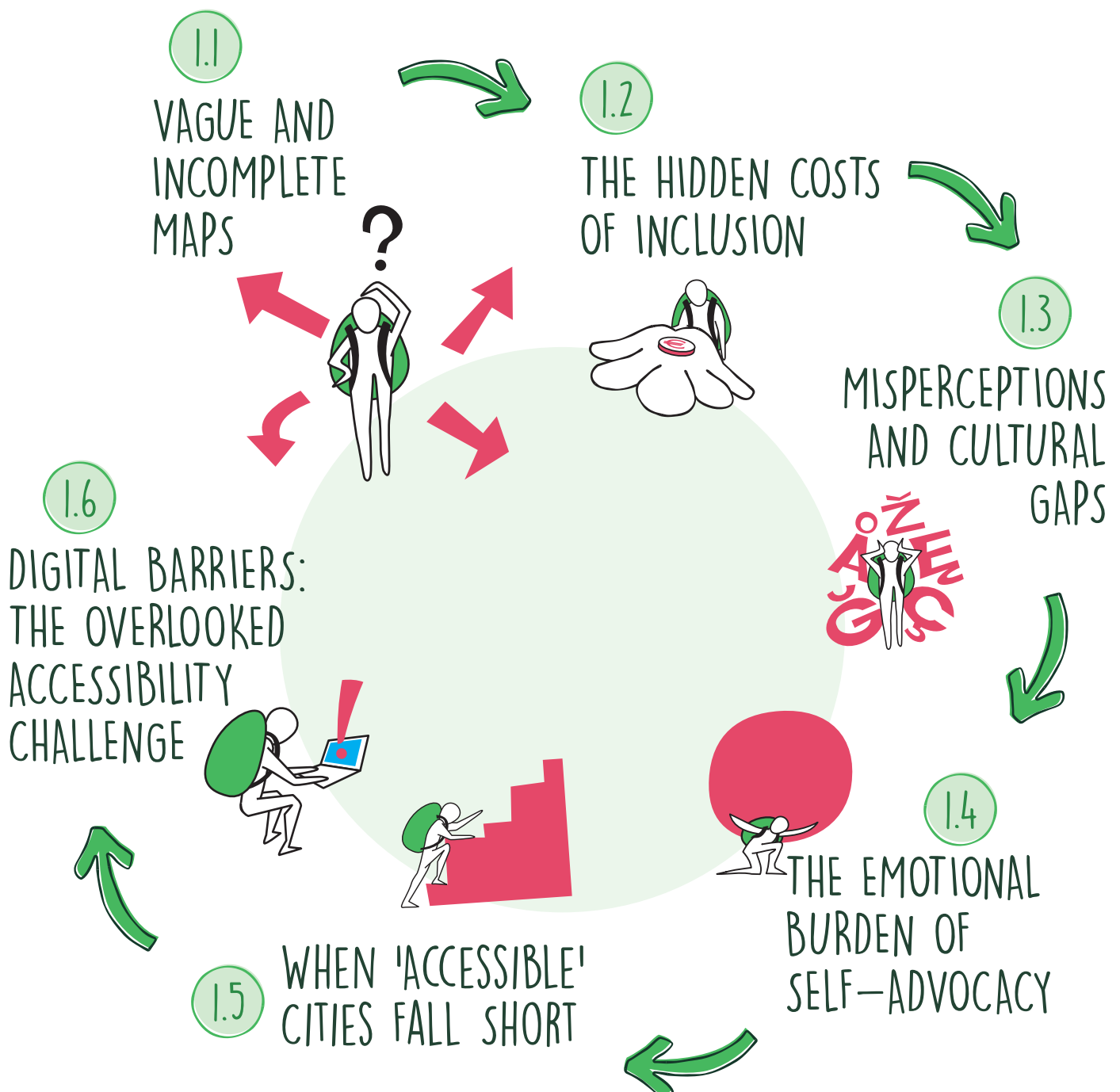
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1 NAVIGATING AN INACCESSIBLE WORLD: STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY

International mobility programs often assume a one-size-fits-all approach, failing to consider the realities of students with disabilities. While many institutions advertise inclusivity, the lived experiences of students who participated in this project reveal a system that is often unprepared to accommodate their diverse needs. The barriers faced are interconnected, forming a cycle that can discourage participation and create additional challenges throughout the mobility journey.



1.1 VAGUE AND INCOMPLETE MAPS

Lack of accessible and reliable information before departure, especially regarding disability-related support, housing, and transportation.

Students often struggled to find accurate details about student housing, transport, and support services. Invisible disabilities were rarely addressed, and institutional guidance was inconsistent. **A key issue is that support systems for disabled people are nationally or locally based.** When students move abroad, they enter a new and unfamiliar system – whether institutional, private, or national – without any guidance on how it works. **This makes comprehensive, context-specific information essential to prepare for mobility and avoid unnecessary risks.**

EXAMPLE:

"I had no idea about the accessibility of the dorms or how to move around the city. It felt like I was planning everything in the dark."
(Finnish student)



While general information about international mobility programs exists, it is often fragmented and unclear for students with disabilities. Many struggle to gather the necessary details independently, leading to uncertainty and hesitation about studying abroad.

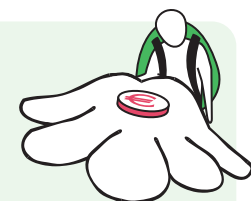
1.2 THE HIDDEN COSTS OF INCLUSION

Disability-related expenses are often excluded from standard mobility grants. Students face additional costs – as travel for personal assistants, adapted equipment, or essential health-related support – that are not always covered or explained in advance.

While Erasmus+ offers some additional funding, **many students are unaware of it, or face complex application procedures. Even when support is available, it often doesn't cover the full scope of needs.** For students who require a companion to meet basic daily needs, mobility becomes financially unfeasible without clear and inclusive funding schemes.

EXAMPLE:

"While I could afford to travel alone, the additional cost of bringing a companion – who was essential for my daily mobility – was not covered by the Erasmus+ grant. As a result, I had to either struggle alone or give up on mobility altogether."
(Turkish student)



Mobility funding models rarely account for the actual cost of disability-related support. Without inclusive financial planning and accessible information, international mobility remains out of reach for many students with disabilities.

1.3 MISPERCEPTIONS AND CULTURAL GAPS

Stereotypes, social stigma, and cultural differences shape how students with disabilities are perceived and supported in host countries.

Students often encountered **unfamiliar support systems, language barriers, and attitudes ranging from pity to complete lack of awareness.** In moments of crisis – such as when equipment broke or urgent help was needed – they didn't know where to go. **These experiences revealed not only cultural differences in perceptions of disability, but also in how health and mobility-related support is structured in different countries, often without any prior guidance.**

EXAMPLE:

"When my wheelchair broke down, I didn't know where to go or how to get help. I had no guidance on how to access repair services abroad."
(Finnish student)



Cultural misperceptions and unfamiliar support systems can deepen the impact of other barriers, especially when institutions and cities are not prepared to offer context-sensitive assistance to students with disabilities.

1.4 THE EMOTIONAL BURDEN OF SELF-ADVOCACY

Students experience emotional strain when they must repeatedly advocate for their needs, often without knowing whether adequate support will be provided.

The lack of assurance about receiving support in the host country generated anxiety and insecurity. This emotional toll often began before departure, as students felt responsible for justifying their needs, navigating bureaucracy, and hoping for a positive response.

EXAMPLE:

“Although my Erasmus experience was positive, I struggled with anxiety due to not knowing whether I would receive the necessary support until I arrived.”
(Portuguese student)



The emotional burden of constantly having to self-advocate undermines students' confidence and well-being. Without proactive and reliable support systems, this invisible barrier can discourage students from even considering mobility opportunities.

1.5 WHEN 'ACCESSIBLE' CITIES FALL SHORT

Poorly maintained infrastructure creates significant obstacles for students with disabilities.

Even when universities offer accessible facilities, the overall infrastructure of the host city may not be suitable for students with disabilities. **Poor sidewalk conditions, unreliable public transport, and a lack of proper accommodations limit their mobility.**

EXAMPLE:

“Although my university had good accessibility features, the surrounding city was highly problematic. Narrow sidewalks, broken ramps, and lack of tactile paving for visually impaired students made everyday movement a challenge.” (Turkish student)



A city's label as “accessible” does not always reflect reality. The mismatch between expected and actual accessibility leads to additional barriers, making international mobility more challenging than anticipated.

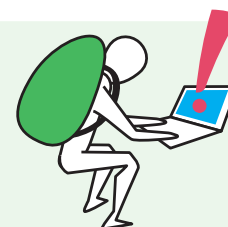
1.6 DIGITAL BARRIERS: THE OVERLOOKED ACCESSIBILITY CHALLENGE

Digital learning platforms that are not compatible with assistive technologies create dependency and reduce academic autonomy.

Even when students can access physical spaces, they may struggle with virtual ones. Online tools and platforms often lack accessibility features, making it difficult for students with visual impairments to work independently. This leads to delays and dependence on others for basic academic tasks.

EXAMPLE:

“I had to rely on others to help me access the materials because the platform wasn't compatible with screen readers.”
(Lithuanian student)



Digital barriers are often overlooked but have a strong impact on students' ability to fully engage with academic content. Inclusive mobility must also address digital accessibility.

A MAP OF INTERCONNECTED BARRIERS

The experiences of students with disabilities reveal a complex network of interrelated barriers that go beyond physical accessibility. Institutional obstacles, financial difficulties, and cultural perceptions do not exist in isolation but instead reinforce one another:



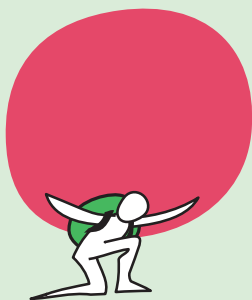
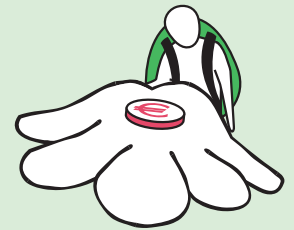
INSTITUTIONAL + FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Students who lack clear institutional guidance often miss out on financial support, increasing their hesitation to apply for international mobility programs.



CULTURAL + FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Uncertainty about medical costs and disability-related expenses is compounded by cultural perceptions that discourage openness about support needs or frame disability as a private or family matter. These factors make students more hesitant to pursue mobility opportunities.



PSYCHOLOGICAL + INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

The emotional strain of advocating for necessary support is worsened by rigid bureaucratic processes and unclear guidelines, which often place the burden of navigation on the student.



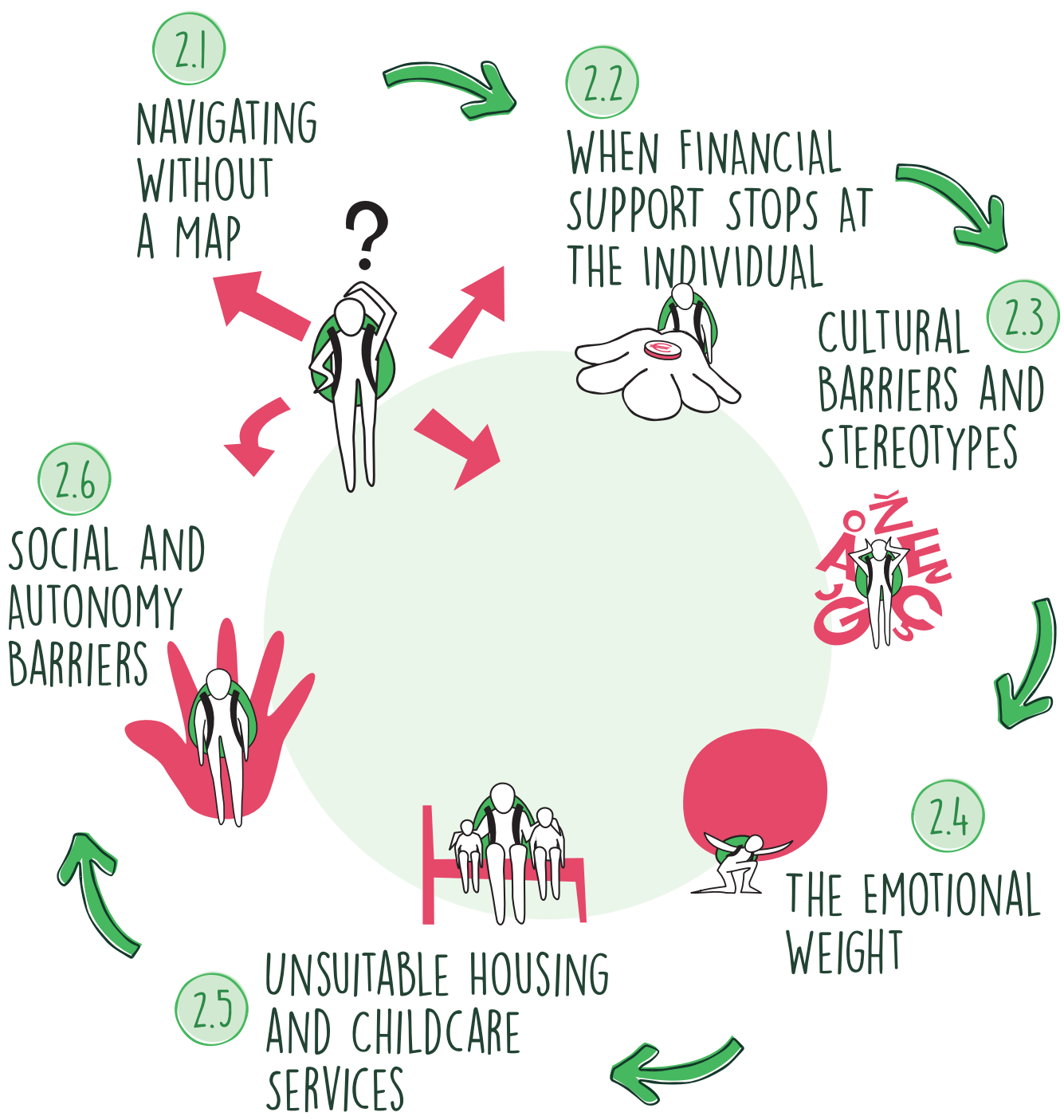
ACCESSIBILITY + CULTURAL BARRIERS

Cities and universities often claim to be “accessible,” but the reality does not always match expectations. Differences in how disability is understood and supported across contexts can create additional challenges.



2 BALANCING CARE AND EDUCATION: STUDENTS WITH CARING RESPONSIBILITIES IN INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY

Student mobility programs often overlook students with caring responsibilities. Their experiences reveal how systems designed for independent students create cascading barriers for caregivers, making the very idea of studying abroad unattainable.



2.1 NAVIGATING WITHOUT A MAP

Students with caring responsibilities face a lack of clear, accessible, and tailored information. Their specific needs are not reflected in standard mobility guidance.

Because these students are rarely represented in mobility programs, there is no established tradition of support. Institutions offer generic information that overlooks key questions about housing, healthcare, and childcare abroad. This forces students to search across disconnected sources without knowing where to begin.

EXAMPLE:

It is already difficult for a student not to know where to start when planning to go abroad, and as the responsibilities increase, the questions increase. You become discouraged when you cannot find answers to these questions.” (Turkish student)



General information exists, but students with caring responsibilities are left to piece together details on their own. The lack of targeted guidance isolates them before the journey even begins.

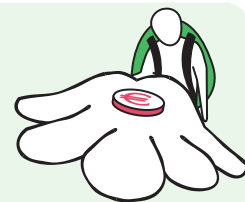
2.2 WHEN FINANCIAL SUPPORT STOPS AT THE INDIVIDUAL

Insufficient scholarships, lack of financial support for dependents, and high costs of housing, transportation, and childcare.

While some additional funding schemes are sometimes available, these are not generally known by students or even by all institutions. Moreover, **standard international mobility funding models often assume single-student households**, creating an unsolvable financial equation for many students with dependents.

EXAMPLE:

There was no possibility of leaving my son (in Lisbon) with my parents for such a long time. I could not take him with me, because the logistics were impossible.” (Portuguese student)



Financial insecurity discourages participation in mobility programs and disproportionately affects students with caring responsibilities. The international mobility experience becomes restricted to those students who have their own financial means to support themselves and their dependents while abroad.

2.3 CULTURAL BARRIERS AND STEREOTYPES

Negative perceptions of caregivers who may be seen as running from their responsibilities, language barriers, and familial discouragement also impact mobility decisions.

For many caregivers, cultural expectations and stereotypes create additional pressure, adding to the perception that international mobility is not suitable for them. Some students reported that family members disapproved of their plans, reinforcing feelings of guilt.

EXAMPLE:

“Although it seems like such a basic thing as the existence of a family, the market is not fully adapted to your life in a family or with children, or with additional obligations at the same time.” (Lithuanian student)



Traditional gender roles and cultural norms further restrict mobility opportunities for students with caring responsibilities. These social attitudes are often overlooked in the design of inclusive measures.

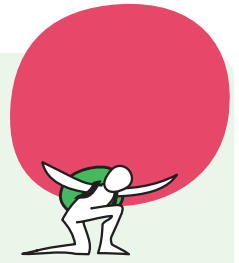
2.4 THE EMOTIONAL WEIGHT

Emotional strain, fear of isolation, and stress caused by balancing caregiving duties with studies in an unfamiliar environment.

The emotional burden of **being responsible for a dependent while studying in an unfamiliar environment** is another aspect often overlooked in the design of more inclusive international mobility programs. Students expressed concerns about the lack of emotional and psychological support available to them.

EXAMPLE:

"Coming to Finland and managing all the chores, baby, and studies on my own did take a toll on my mental health." (International student in Finland)



Emotional strain is closely linked to other barriers, as the lack of support increases stress and uncertainty, undermining students' confidence in their ability to succeed abroad.



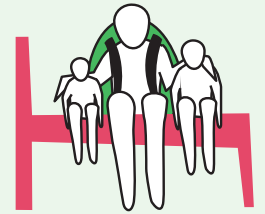
2.5 UNSUITABLE HOUSING AND CHILDCARE SERVICES

Lack of family-friendly housing, difficulties accessing childcare, and barriers in navigating host cities

Even when basic support exists, the lived experiences of students indicate that **many cities and universities are not friendly spaces for students with caring responsibilities**. Available housing is often unsuitable for families, and daycare options tend to be scarce.

EXAMPLE:

"Finding a suitable rental in Europe is now a big problem. After a certain age, you can't stay in a dorm room anymore, not with children." (Turkish student)



The lack of family-friendly infrastructure creates additional obstacles, forcing students to choose between educational opportunities and their caregiving responsibilities.



2.6 SOCIAL AND AUTONOMY BARRIERS

Assumptions that caregivers cannot balance studies and international mobility, lack of inclusion in university mobility culture, and social isolation.

Students felt that **international mobility programs were designed for young, single students without family obligations**, reinforcing feelings of exclusion. Some students reported that they felt overlooked in mobility discussions, as if these opportunities were not meant for them.

EXAMPLE:

"Even when mobility opportunities were available, the way they were advertised made me feel that these programs were 'not meant' for people like me." (Portuguese student)

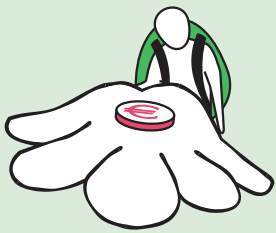


Social bias can make students internalize the idea that mobility is not for them, limiting their willingness to apply or seek institutional support.



A MAP OF INTERCONNECTED BARRIERS

The experiences of students with caring responsibilities reveal a **network of interrelated barriers** that go beyond financial and institutional challenges. **Cultural perceptions, bureaucratic obstacles, and emotional strain are deeply interconnected**, shaping students' international mobility decisions:



INSTITUTIONAL + FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Lack of institutional support for students with caring responsibilities reinforces financial stress, making international mobility unfeasible.



CULTURAL + FINANCIAL BARRIERS

Cultural expectations around caregiving shape financial decisions, leading students to fear economic instability abroad.



PSYCHOLOGICAL + INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

The absence of clear pre-mobility support increases mental stress, affecting students' confidence in applying.



ACCESSIBILITY + CULTURAL BARRIERS

Cities and universities claim to support caregivers, but their infrastructures often fail to meet real caregiving needs.



SO, WHAT ARE THE MAIN TAKEAWAYS?

CONTRIBUTIONS TOWARDS A MORE INCLUSIVE **ERASMUS+**

The findings from the Dialogue Forums reveal that students with disabilities and students with caring responsibilities continue to face multiple barriers to international mobility. The Inclusion+ project responds to these challenges by proposing structural change at both higher education institutions and city levels.

For students with disabilities, accessibility is often reactive and fragmented, requiring them to constantly self-advocate within systems that place the burden on individuals rather than offering proactive, coordinated support. For students with caring responsibilities, the system continues to assume an idealized fully independent student, ignoring the realities of those who manage caregiving alongside academic life. In both cases, barriers are not isolated — they are multiple, intersecting, and often invisible in traditional program design.

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