



NEEDS

Enhancing Societal Security graduate employability
in the Baltic Sea Region

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About the NEEDS project

The 'Needs-based education and studies in Societal Security' (NEEDS) project addresses the skills gap and mismatch between higher education and the knowledge needs in this field, as well as the fact that there is a lack of structured transnational cooperation and dialogue between higher education institutions, practitioners, and experts in tackling these issues.

The project is co-funded by the EU Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership (project code 2020-1-SE01-KA203-078013) and runs from September 2020 through August 2023. It is led by the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) Secretariat, an intergovernmental regional organisation with eleven member states. The project partners represent a variety of higher education institutions, regional organisations and national authorities from Finland, Germany, Norway, Poland, Latvia and Sweden. The objective of NEEDS is to better prepare the next generation working in the field of Societal Security by boosting their educational experiences with the most relevant, field-specific and up-to-date knowledge and skills. This objective will be achieved through the co-creation of educational materials by cross-sectoral, multi-level and transnational teams, where the input for developing such material is collected directly from those working practically in the field.

The NEEDS project focuses on the Baltic Sea Region (BSR), which includes eleven countries (i.e., the full members of the CBSS: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Russia, and Sweden). Even though the NEEDS project primarily focuses on the BSR, the results may also be relevant for other regions. The project will meet Societal Security challenges by 1) developing common learning materials for a short online course on Societal Security for the BSR, as well as 2) establishing a community of professionals, a network and an interface for collaboration. Transnational and cross-sectoral teams will be at the centre of these efforts and will draw upon an innovative pedagogical approach. Nurturing strategic partnerships and cooperation will strengthen trust and deepen understanding between sectors and countries in the BSR, helping to improve common efforts and reduce the risk of conflict and misunderstanding.

This report – using Erasmus+ vocabulary – represents the NEEDS project's Intellectual Output 2 (IO2). In this work package, it is preceded by a March 2021 report titled *Societal Security as Higher Education: The State of the Art in the Baltic Sea Region* (1). The report at hand homes in on two more detailed issues within this context:

Task 2.3: Analysis of the student-practice interfaces used in the study programmes in the field of Societal Security in the BSR – a comparative analysis.

Task 2.4: Analysis of the cross-border/transnational/global dimensions of the study programmes in the field of Societal Security in the BSR – a comparative analysis.

The report, combining the above-mentioned two tasks and finalised in August 2021, is designed to be a 'living document' and will be updated, based on potential future comments, feedback and new data, prior to being incorporated into the IO2 Final Report in December 2021.

1 Pursiainen, C., & Abdel-Fattah, D. (2021). *Societal Security as Higher Education: The State of the Art in the Baltic Sea Region*. NEEDS project proceedings. Stockholm: Council of the Baltic Sea States/EUSBSR Secure. Retrieved 5 July 2021 from <http://www.bsr-secure.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/FINALV1-2.pdf>.

The authors are indebted to the project partners and other colleagues for their invaluable information and comments. Most of all, we would like to express our special gratitude to those study programme leaders (including Adrian Bralewski, Pawel Gromek, Henrik Hassel, Magnus Johansson, Björn Karlsson, Sergejs Latnikovs, Are Sydnes, and Piia Tint) and students (anonymous) who responded to the questionnaires, the results of which are summarised in this report (2).

Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of the student-practice interfaces provided by Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in the Baltic Sea Region countries to the students studying courses and attending programmes within the field of Societal Security. The overview draws upon the analysis of the responses from two questionnaires which were circulated in Spring 2021, one targeted towards societal security students, and the other towards programme directors. Both questionnaires aimed to better understand the competence and skills required to the students and provided by the courses, and the level of internationalisation of societal security programmes in HEIs located in the Baltic Sea Region.

The questionnaire reveals a rather homogeneous picture concerning the academic and professional merits required for admission to the courses, while a higher degree of diversity with regards to the offer of courses contents, focus sectors, interdisciplinarity, internship opportunities and level of internationalisation. Finally, the report also investigates how the Covid-19 crisis has affected the activities within the societal security education and reflects on the lessons learnt for the further improvement of the student-practice interfaces within this field's programmes.

2 The raw data from the questionnaires can be obtained from the corresponding author: Stephanie Young, Swedish Defence University, email Stephanie.Young@fhs.se

1 Introduction

This report provides an analysis of the student-practice interfaces used in the study programmes in the field of Societal Security in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR), as well as the level of internationalisation of these study programmes. In more concrete terms, these include such issues and practices as domestic or international internships and exchanges, training, exercises and skills-oriented teaching and learning, and the relevant methods and tools adopted by higher education institutes (HEIs) in preparing students for their future working life in the variety of Society Security sectors. The analysis draws upon the results of two questionnaires developed within the NEEDS project, the first circulated among study programme leaders and the other among students in the respective study programmes in spring 2021. While the samples are not wholly representative and the number of respondents in both surveys is rather low compared to the totality of such study programmes and their students in the BSR (3), duly leading to some external validity bias, they nonetheless provide some clues about the existing trends in our subjects of interest.

The more generic issue here is by no means limited to the field of Societal Security but is highly relevant in the whole higher education (HE) field. From early on, one of the main goals of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), or the Bologna process currently comprising 49 countries, has been to facilitate graduate *employability*. It is mentioned in the EHEA documents that the term employability is challenging, implying a variety of concrete applications. Most notably, higher education producers have to balance between generic and subject-specific knowledge and competences, as well as between 'hard' and 'soft' skills. The EHEA, however, is rather explicit in terms of what increasing employability means to the HEIs: "Types of learning should become more and more differentiated in order to provide learning opportunities, including non-formal and informal learning, for a diversifying student population." (4)

The current report nevertheless focuses on the field, or emerging discipline, of Societal Security. The concept of Societal Security, and particularly how it is understood in the current NEEDS project, is thoroughly discussed in a previous report (5). In any case, it is a highly multi- and interdisciplinary field, as both an HE and a practical professional and societal activity. In disciplinary terms, the field includes elements from the Humanities, Legal Studies, Sociology, Political Science, International Relations, Military Studies, Public Policy Studies, Organisation Studies, Psychology, Health Sciences, Business Studies, Engineering, and Natural Sciences. In more practical terms, should the Societal Security graduates be employed in their own or closely-related profession, there is a great variety of possible employers and required respective knowledge and skills. Societal Security is mainly divided between social sciences and technological study programmes, combined with many other fields such as health and business studies. These capabilities are basically needed in any sectoral field related to activities in contemporary societies. Potential employers include the full spectrum of public administration at all levels in business and industry, academia and research institutions, non-profit and non-governmental organisations, and transnational and intergovernmental organisations. Given that risk management and crisis management, being essential components of Societal Security, have

3 See the rather comprehensive list of first- and second-cycle Societal Security HE study programmes in the BSR in Pursiainen & Abdel-Fattah (2021), op. cit.

4 EHEA (n.d.). *Employability of graduates*. [Website] The European Higher Education Area. Retrieved 5 July 2021 from <http://www.ehea.info/page-employability-of-graduates>.

5 Pursiainen & Abdel-Fattah (2021), op. cit.

increasingly become an important element of any policies and businesses, the education is relevant to more general management positions. At the same time, one can find increasingly specialised job titles for safety and security professionals and experts in particular.

So what does this range of employability mean with regard to HE? Taking a macroregional perspective, how should HEIs take into account the demands of employability within this rather complex educational field or discipline of Societal Security, particularly in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR), consisting of eleven countries?

In chapter 2 of the report at hand, we start to discuss this issue by firstly looking at some basic concepts related to graduate employment and the working life relevance of study programmes that can be found in the literature. In this way, not yet zooming in on Societal Security as a particular field of HE, we can identify some of the main generic conditions and challenges that either enhance or hinder graduate employability. After that, in chapter 3, we begin by briefly presenting the results of the survey for Societal Security study programme leaders, in order to identify the current state of practices as related to the above-mentioned ingredients of employability of graduates in this field of HE in particular. This is followed by a similar summary of the survey that was targeted at students. Finally, in chapter 4, we articulate some tentative conclusions and recommendations.

2 Elements enhancing graduate employability

Being part of the EHEA, the European Commission's Erasmus+ Programme has adopted the employability concept. Besides focusing on transnational mobility, the programme aims at "new teaching methods and learning tools that incorporate transversal skills learning and application throughout higher education and VET [vocational education and training] programmes developed in cooperation with enterprises and aimed at strengthening employability, creativity and new professional pathways". (6)

In this chapter, we discuss some of the indicators of a successful HE study programme in terms of graduate employability, as well as the challenges related to the sometimes different expectations of students, employers and HEIs in this regard. Most importantly, we look at the existing or possible student-practice interfaces and the skills that students are supposed to develop to enhance their working life relevance and employability. While the literature on these issues is rather extensive, our unexhaustive review merely selects those elements that seem most relevant for the purposes of the current report. We also tentatively discuss the idiosyncrasies of Societal Security in this context, although further discussion to that effect will be provided in the subsequent chapter, which provides some insights and evidence based on our recent surveys in the BSR.

6 *Erasmus+ programme guide*. Version 1 (2021), p. 234. Retrieved 5 July 2021 from <https://www.you-net.eu/erasmus-programme-guide.html>.

2.1 What are working life relevance and employability?

Most of the research literature related to our theme focuses on one country or educational field, whereas empirical cross-country and cross-disciplinary comparisons are rather rare. (7) From a more conceptual-theoretical perspective, this literature typically discusses the variety of related typologies and terms with their rival definitions, and, perhaps more importantly, identifies some indicators or criteria that determine the scope of these central concepts. (8)

There is no unambiguous definition of employability. The European Commission 2018 report *Promoting the Relevance of Higher Education*, (9) while noting that all countries have their specific relevance evaluation criteria and respective methodologies, has however developed a set of indicators based on three main factors: personal development, active citizenship, and sustainable employment. Of these, the latter is the most relevant to the issues dealt with in the report at hand. Sustainable employment, in turn, is divided between three perspectives, namely those of *students and graduates*, *employers*, and *society* at large. The indicators are depicted in Table 1.

While Table 1 gives some indication of what should be enhanced to foster sustainable employability, there are of course several ways to increase the relevance of HE in this sense. The traditions, pre-conditions, resources, goals, strategies, approaches, and results vary from country to country, even in the BSR. The issues at stake are also open to interpretation to a considerable extent and depend on concrete applications. Some studies surveying students have found that there is a great level of insecurity and clear contradictions in the students' answers when it comes to the relevance of their education to working life. The students may be overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of working life relevance in terms of both the academic content and the generic skills they acquire. But when asked directly, a clear majority may reply that their particular study programme has little or no orientation towards working life. (10)

One of the challenges may be that the students often do not have a realistic picture of the working life they are asked about and aiming at. In other words, they do not actually know what kind of knowledge, competencies and skills are needed in their projected work, and only have some perceptions instead. Therefore, among other reasons, adding student-practice interfaces to the study programmes can be considered a positive element for creating realistic working life experience in the chosen HE field even during the educational period. Research suggests that increasing the practical aspects of degree programmes, irrespective of the field of study, will not

7 McGuinness, S., Whelan, A., & Bergin, A. (2016). *Is There a Role for Higher Education Institutions in Improving the Quality of First Employment?* IZA Discussion Paper No. 10138. Bonn: Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit/Institute for the Study of Labor.

8 Suleman, F. (2018). The employability skills of higher education graduates: insights into conceptual frameworks and methodological options. *Higher Education*, 76, pp. 263–278; Nisha Subbu M. Rajasekaran, V. (2018). Employability Skills: A Review. *IUP Journal of Soft Skills*, 12(1), pp. 29–37.

9 Vossensteyn, H. et al. (2018). *Promoting the Relevance of Higher Education. Main Report*. European Commission. Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

10 Kantardjiev, K., & Haakstad, J. (2018). Working Life Relevance in Norwegian discipline-oriented programmes. Knowledge status and student perceptions. Retrieved 10 July 2021 from https://www.nokut.no/contentassets/5c0dd71da3cf49da98e9675673cceda1/kantardjiev_haakstad_working_life_relevance.pdf.

only enhance employability but also reduce the incidence of initial mismatch, especially when it comes to a graduate's first job. (11)

Table 1. Indicators of sustainable employment

NEEDS INDICATORS OF SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT (European Commission)		
For students and graduates	For employers	For society
Qualifications	Employees able to flexibly adapt to changing tasks	Economic productivity
Basic skills	Creative employees and low turnover in staff	Extent of employment and unemployment
Transferable skills	Diversity of and good mix of qualifications, skills, and competencies	Impact of higher education on public revenues and social security systems
Knowledge, technical and professional skills, competencies	Sufficient supply of highly educated employees	Impact of sustainable employment on families, friends, associations, neighbourhoods
Cultural capital	Employers' satisfaction with skills and competencies	Highly educated workforce
Social capital	Employees' productivity	Innovation capacity of economy
Social prestige associated with the education or the occupation of graduates		Knowledge-based economy
Successful transition to the labour market		Impact of higher education on growth
Adequacy of employment		External effects of skills and competencies on families, friends, associations, neighbourhoods
Earnings		
Career opportunities		
Long-term job security		
Job satisfaction		

Source: Compiled from the European Commission 2018 report (12)

In the field of Societal Security, student expectations may vary widely across the study programmes we are looking at. This is because the field is essentially multidisciplinary, and while some elements of interdisciplinarity can be found in individual study programmes, the HE in this field is still divided between social sciences-oriented and engineering or technological sciences-oriented study programmes. The former, like any social science HE, are much more difficult to define in terms of the expected employability than the more technological study programmes.

11 McGuinness et al. (2016), op. cit.

12 Vossensteyn et al. (2018), op. cit.

However, any Societal Security student and graduate would benefit from gaining a better picture of the type of skills that are essential for their employability and future successful working life.

2.2 Student-practice interfaces

A student-practice interface can be understood as a point or activity where the students will receive a more realistic picture of the needs of employers. When it comes to asking students about their preferred student-practice interfaces, a summary view has been presented in a large-N study presented in a report by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, focusing on Norway specifically. Five issues – in the order listed below – stand out from the responses given by the students to the question of how the relevance of their education could be enhanced. The first of these options was overwhelmingly the most popular among the students. (13)

- More or better opportunities for practice in study programmes
- Problem-solving in collaboration with companies
- More working life-oriented teaching
- Better guidance on labour market opportunities
- Several electives that are directly aimed at working life

Again, this list of good options is somewhat difficult to implement in practice. While students would generally prefer more traineeships and internships, in some more detailed surveys one can find that students' satisfaction seems to vary considerably, both during the training and depending on the cycle, university or programme. (14) Furthermore, it seems that the expectations of students, employers and HEIs vary considerably as to traineeships and internships. This then leads to the suggestion that prior to the internship period, a proper discussion between these three parties should be conducted, (15) which presupposes some level of institutionalisation of the HEI-employer relationship, and duly adding students to that frame. Some call this a triangular design relationship. (16) It has been pointed out that an HEI-employer partnership would be needed to facilitate a successful internship for the student, and that this should be an integrated part of the mandatory curricula. This kind of carefully planned and organised cooperation would be necessary to adapt the education to the needs of working life. (17) In many cases, this has been facilitated by having joint HEI-employer-student interviews, on an equal basis, where these issues can be dealt with – instead of leaving it to the individual student to negotiate with the potential employer that would host the internship. Some studies based on employer interviews have suggested much more institutionalised facilitation. Besides interviews, such employability activities could include awards and programmes, engaging employers in the design

13 Government of Norway (2021). *Utdanning for omstilling. Økt arbeidslivsrelevans i høyere utdanning*. Meld. St. 16 (2020–2021). Melding til Stortinget. Tilråding fra Kunnskapsdepartementet 12. mars 2021, godkjent i statsråd samme dag. (Regjeringen Solberg), p. 48.

14 Săveanu, S., Bacter, C., & Buhaş, R. (2017). Practical Training – A Challenge for Higher Education. Analysis of Students' Satisfaction with Traineeships. *Sociologie Românească*, 15(3-4), pp. 81–97.

15 Hayes Sauder, M., Mudrick, M., Strassle, C. G., Maitoza, R., Malcarne, B., & Evans, B. (2019). What Did You Expect? Divergent Perceptions Among Internship Stakeholders. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 42(2), pp. 105–120.

16 Rosenberg, S., Heimler, R., & Morote, E. (2012). Basic employability skills: a triangular design approach. *Education + Training*, 54(1), pp. 7–20.

17 Franco, M., Silva, R., & Rodrigues, M. (2019). Partnerships between higher education institutions and firms: The role of students' curricular internships. *Industry and Higher Education*, 33(3), pp. 172–185.

and delivery of courses, and involving them in committees and policy on employability. (18) In general, it is about creating partnerships between the HEIs and employers. The issue is obviously how to create these long-lasting structural partnerships as both parties are typically busy with their own core daily issues, people come and go in organisations, and in general the central administrations in HEIs are not very active in facilitating these partnership contacts. Hence, for both parties, it often implies overly complicated extra work, without proper facilitation and institutionalisation.

In the Societal Security field, the above-mentioned issues and challenges are familiar although perhaps rarely resolved and managed in a satisfactory manner. The positive exceptions seem to be the vocationally oriented study programmes, such as fire and rescue HE programmes, which may rather easily find employer counterparts (respective rescue services and authorities), compared to the more fragmented field of employability for most Societal Security study programmes.

2.3 What skills do students need for employment?

What then should the students learn in order to equip them for working life? Obviously, typical specific-to-the-profession technological and basic knowledge are required. In an earlier NEEDS report, we noted that at least in the BSR and in the field of the Societal Security, the core courses in study programmes provide rather comprehensive knowledge of such issue areas as risk management, crisis management, safety management, and resilience. All of these can then naturally be divided into many more specific knowledge areas such as risk analysis techniques, crisis communication, safety investigation methods or resilience assessment. (19) Employers can then expect that the students or graduates have a basic understanding of these issues in their respective field or chosen profession.

However, it seems that more generic, so-called soft skills or key competences (20) are even more important, irrespective of the field. These include oral communication skills, written communication skills, non-verbal communication skills, teamwork skills, positive attitude skills, interpersonal skills, motivational skills, problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, self-management skills, presentation skills and tool handling skills. (21)

In one survey studying employers' expectations of HE graduates in any field, the ability to learn was among the most valued skills, particularly a graduate's ability to assimilate new knowledge rapidly. Unsurprisingly, employers were also concerned that HE is often too theoretical, and the gulf between studies and the realities of the workplace too wide. (22) Yet literature reviews suggest that there is little consensus on what employability skills are exactly, and how to measure them. (23)

18 E.g. Lowden, K. Hall, S., Elliot, D., & Lewin, J. (2011). *Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates*. Research commissioned by the Edge Foundation. Glasgow: University of Glasgow.

19 Pursiainen & Abdel-Fattah (2021), op. cit.

20 Suleman (2018), op. cit.

21 Nisha Subbu & Rajasekaran (2018), op. cit.

22 Hernández-March, J., Martín del Peso, M., & Leguey, S. (2019). Graduates' Skills and Higher Education: The employers' perspective. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 15(1), pp. 1–16.

23 Suleman (2018), op. cit., p. 275.

2.4 Internationalisation and employability

The internationalisation of HE has already been a much-debated policy and academic theme for some three decades now and is strongly connected to employability. The issue is closely related to that of globalisation – and in Europe, Europeanisation – of societies that are integrated within the European Union (EU) framework. HEIs are supposed to prepare graduates to live and work in this global environment, which in turn is supposed to enhance national and regional economic growth. In the EU, internationalisation has largely been understood as enhancing and implementing the Bologna goals of the mutual recognition of HE degrees as well as staff and student mobility, for which the most important tool has been the Erasmus+ programme. 24 In European policy cooperation (ET 2020 framework), the goal was set that at least 20% of HE graduates and 6% of 18- to 34-year-olds with an initial vocational qualification should have spent some time studying or training abroad. (25)

Critical accounts of this development note that the connection between HE and economic globalisation invariably means that neoliberal interpretations of internationalisation have become drivers for developing the higher education policies in many countries.²⁶ Thus, the internationalisation of HE in the context of more generic strategies of countries and regions is driven by the ambitions and perceptions of the needs of globalisation, due to economic pressure and competition. In Europe, the respective EU and national policies to this effect cascade to HEIs, which are developing their own responses within their limits of their autonomy. The EU's HE internationalisation strategy has, however, been described as more comprehensive and student-centred than that of some other regions or countries, which apply even more market-centred strategies.²⁷ On the other hand, the EU approach is claimed to lead not only to the harmonisation of performance criteria, but also to the homogenisation of HEI strategies, and putting emphasis on quantitative rather than qualitative indicators. Moreover, besides mobility efforts, the basic original form of HE internationalisation, there is also an increasing trend towards the internationalisation of curricula, often manifested first in double or joint study programmes and the respective degrees. Digital learning tools are probably enhancing this development. Internationally, the development is characterised in many countries by a lack of public funding, which leads to privatised solutions and more competitive environments and solutions. (28)

What then connects internationalisation with the employability of graduates? From the perspective of globalised employers, graduates with experience of having studied abroad are highly attractive. This kind of mobility experience is perceived as a soft skills indicator of open-mindedness, an ability to adapt to different kinds of situations, and as being compatible with the

24 European Commission (2017). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic And Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on a renewed EU agenda for higher education*. COM(2017) 247 final. Brussels, 30.5.2017.

25 European policy cooperation (ET 2020 framework) website. Retrieved on 23 July 2021 from https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/et2020-framework_en.

26 Robson, S., & Wihlborg, M. (2019). Internationalisation of higher education: Impacts, challenges and future possibilities. *European Educational Research Journal*, 18(2), pp. 127–134. See also the other article in this special issue.

27 Tamtik, M. (2016). Who governs the internationalization of higher education? A comparative analysis of macro-regional policies in Canada and the European Union. *Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale*, 46(1), Article 2.

28 See e.g., the comprehensive study by de Wit, H., Hunter, F., Howard, L., & Egron-Polak, E. (2015). *Internationalisation of Higher Education*. European Parliament. Directorate-General for Internal Policies. Policy Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policies. Culture and Education.

image of internationalised companies or activities. Employers often consider that the increase in globalisation has heightened the need for graduates with the ability to operate in culturally diverse contexts, associated with such skills as creating networks, experiential learning, language acquisition, and cultural understanding, as well as the respective personal characteristics. Some surveys, however, highlight that while all employers consider graduates' international experience an advantage, it is seldom understood as a prerequisite for employment. (29)

In many fields, only a rather small minority of students participate in European or other international exchange programmes, however. If the intercultural abilities created during international exchanges are nevertheless considered important by employers, it raises the question of whether all students should engage in such programmes. Or should other options be available to enhance internationalisation? To this end, some HEIs have created learning environments for 'local internationalisation'. The aim is not only to add international elements to the curricula but, even more importantly, to encourage students to have extra-curricular activities to that effect. In a more organised manner, this duly goes back to internships and voluntary activities during studies. Students may be literally tasked by the HEI with voluntary or paid work in any organisation or company whose work deals with an international dimension. In some cases, this type of internationalisation is facilitated by the HEI supervisor if needed, but it can also be understood as a part of extra-curricular learning, whereupon the students' ability to find and negotiate their own placement is a facet of professional skills development. (30)

Again, Societal Security – arguably like any HE field or discipline – has its own idiosyncrasies. As the field deals with issues such as crises, emergencies, disaster and other civil contingencies, the mainstream understanding is that while many of the related activities are located at national and even more local levels (such as municipalities), the current safety and security challenges have transnational or even global roots. Climate change-induced risks as well as the current coronavirus pandemic are good examples. The countries in the BSR face several common Societal Security challenges due to their geographical proximity and functional interdependencies. The fact that neighbouring countries are often called upon to provide support for one another when a crisis emerges is yet another important motivation for improving transnational cooperation.

29 Ripmeester N. (2016). Internationalisation and Employability. Making the Connection between Degree and the World of Work. In E. Jones, R. Coelen, J. Beelen, & H. Wit (Eds.). *Global and Local Internationalization. Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* (pp. 121–127). Rotterdam: SensePublishers; Crossman, J. E., & Clarke, M. (2010). International experience and graduate employability: stakeholder perceptions on the connection. *Higher Education*, 59, pp. 599–613.

30 Watkins, H., & Smith, R. (2018). Thinking Globally, Working Locally: Employability and Internationalization at Home. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 22(3), pp. 210–224; Jones, E. (2018). Mobility, Graduate Employability and Local Internationalisation. In E. Jones, R. Coelen, J. Beelen, & H. Wit (Eds.). *Global and Local Internationalization. Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* (pp. 105–116). Rotterdam: SensePublishers.

3 Empirical evidence from the BSR in the field of Societal Security

For the purposes of the current report, two questionnaire-based online surveys (31) were conducted, focusing in particular on Societal Security study programmes in the BSR, as identified and described in an earlier report on the project. (32) The first survey was carried out among the respective study programme leaders, representing both social science, engineering and other variations of the Societal Security study programme orientations, as well as both first-cycle and second-cycle levels of HE, including some HE-level vocational study programmes. The second survey was oriented towards students in the same basic BSR Societal Security study programmes, to collect their views in principle on the same issues, albeit formulated in a slightly different way. The link to the survey was sent to the students via the respective study leaders who had also responded to the first survey, so it is highly likely that the study programmes in both surveys are the same. The results of these two surveys are presented below.

3.1 Asking the study programme leaders: a summary of questionnaire results

All in all, the questionnaire collected fifteen responses from study programme leaders, duly representing the same number of study programmes. The majority of the input was provided by HEIs from Latvia with 5 responses (33.3% of the responses), followed by Sweden with 4 responses (26.7%), and Poland 2 responses (13.3%). Estonia, Finland, Iceland and Norway provided one response each. (33) Given these rather modest figures (23% compared to the identified 27 first-cycle and 38 second-cycle study programmes) (34), the representativeness of the survey is far from exhaustive and partially biased in terms of geography, but nonetheless provides some orientation regarding the situation. The results can be summarised by distinguishing between five items that were particularly relevant when considering employability: selection of students based on their background knowledge; internship opportunities; pedagogical and training methods for skills enhancement; online education; and internationalisation of studies.

3.1.1 Selection of students

The background knowledge of students when they enter study programmes obviously affects their study success, as well as their subsequent employability. In a field such as Societal Security, this is even more important as the field is more practice-oriented rather than theoretical. The selection and preparation of Societal Security students within HEIs in the BSR seems to take place at a rather advanced stage of a student's educational trajectory. As mentioned above, the majority of existing programmes specifically targeted at the Societal Security field are actually at the master's level (38/65 or 58%).

31 The raw data from the questionnaires can be obtained from the corresponding author: Stephanie Young, Swedish Defence University, email Stephanie.Young@fhs.se.

32 Pursiainen & Abdel-Fattah (2021), op. cit.

33 We would like to thank the following HEIs: TalTech (EE); Laurea University of Applied Sciences (FI); University of Iceland (IS); Fire Safety and Civil Protection College of Latvia (LV); Riga Technical University (LV) (with several study programmes); UIT The Arctic University of Norway (NO); The Main School of Fire Service (PL) (several study programmes); Karlstad University (SE); and Lund University (SE).

34 See Pursiainen & Abdel-Fattah (2021), op. cit.

The questionnaire further investigated whether students were accepted onto the programmes on the basis of their academic merits or their professional competence, and how the selection criteria have developed and evolved over time, taking as reference points the years 2019 and 2020. There do not seem to be any major differences between the two reference years. In both cases, more than 60% of the responses indicated that all or most of the students were selected based on their academic merits. However, the results can be interpreted as mixed to the extent that around 25% of respondents indicated that their students are selected on the basis of a combination of previous professional competence and academic criteria. The rest of the respondents were unsure about the exact criteria.

These results appear to be in line with the overall framework of the HE system, where students typically follow a more or less linear path from first-cycle (bachelor's) programmes (not necessarily in Societal Security) to second-cycle (master's) programmes (in Societal Security), and continue developing their professional skills thereafter, while, less frequently, practical professional experience is gained before the studies are completed. However, in the case of Societal Security, and especially in the field of fire and rescue service or in the civil protection field, it is not uncommon for some skills to be acquired at an earlier stage in the education system, pointing to a professional educational background and some working-life experience in the respective profession. In a more detailed, discussion-based consideration of experiences in the BSR, it becomes clear that Societal Security is a study field that is regarded as particularly appropriate for academic meriting and as a career development tool for those who are already employed, or who have gained experience in such professions as the police and other law enforcement fields, rescue services, and the military. Their original educational background may represent a first-cycle HE level or a lower level, which is then complemented with first- or second-cycle Societal Security studies. At the same time, some clearly vocational institutions (such as fire and rescue academies) provide second-cycle study programmes for professionals who need them for career advancement.

As the transition from an already established profession might require more flexibility than typical academic study programmes with their full-time requirements allow, we can find many such HE study programme formats in Societal Security (e.g., distance/block or 'gathering only twice a semester-based' courses) that enable already employed students to enhance their academic credentials while still working full or almost full-time in their current positions. Indeed, even a cursory look at the developments of new study programmes in many BSR countries shows that Societal Security study formats are increasingly becoming more flexible and tailored to the needs of the students, based on the lifelong learning principle and varied needs of students and employers.

While the obvious challenge for HEIs is to be able to organise these new or hybrid types of HE for students with varied background knowledge, at the same time the issue of how to maintain the academic level of HE in accordance with these needs also poses a challenge. In some countries this can be and has been resolved by institutionalising a clear boundary between applied science and traditional research HEIs (e.g., Finland and Germany), whereas in other countries (e.g., Norway) the solution has been to overcome this difference by merging previous polytechnics or vocational educational institutions with research universities while adding practical elements to the curricula.

3.1.2 Internship opportunities

In order to assess the connection between HEI study programmes in the field of Societal Security and the respective in-the-field practices and skills, the questionnaire investigated whether the existing study programmes in the BSR countries do offer students of Societal Security the possibility of accomplishing field experience and practice, in the form of internships and/or training opportunities. Two research HEIs in our survey reported that their study programmes do not facilitate any curriculum-related internships, while a slight majority of respondents confirmed that their HEI does offer these kinds of internships and that they are mandatory. According to about a quarter of respondents, the internship possibility is offered but is voluntary in nature. Altogether this forms a clear majority in terms of study programmes that facilitate either mandatory or voluntary internships in terms of ECTS. These results are summarised in Figure 1.

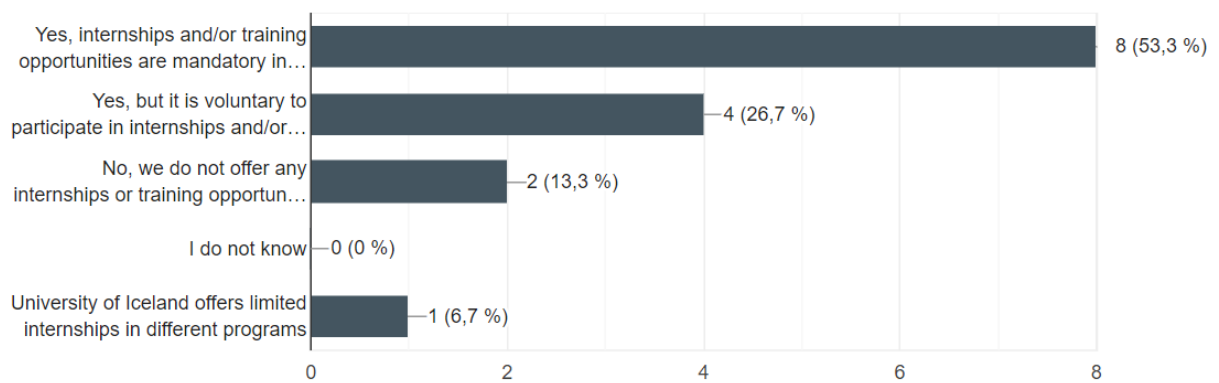


Figure 1. Study programme leaders: opportunity for an internship? (Metrics = persons (and %), N = 15)

The institutions that do provide these opportunities typically offer the students the possibility to access internships for different periods of time. The prevailing options are short-term placements, lasting between one week and one month. In some HEIs that have this element in their Societal Security study programmes, the students seem to attend several such short-term placements throughout the duration of the study programme. It is also common, however, for the training to consist of medium-term placements, lasting between one and three months, which can take place once during the programme or several times throughout the duration of the programme. Vocationally oriented HEIs in particular seem to have a variety of options, with some internships lasting between three months and one year per programme.

These results indicate that there is great variety, and sometimes flexibility, in the way the internship has been or can be combined with and integrated into the curricula. This calls for more research and experiments to understand which formats would best fit which HEI study programmes, thus identifying potential good practices that could be recommended more generally.

In which fields do these internships take place? Focusing on completed internships during 2019 and 2020, there seems to be a rather broad coverage of internship-based training of students within different branches, duly reflecting the fields of Societal Security. These include governance and policy institutions, education and research, private security companies, non-governmental

institutions, international non-governmental institutions, operational fields such as fire and hazardous response services, search and rescue services, health and medical services, law enforcement, and critical infrastructures. It appears that in the case of more vocational HEIs, their institutionalised cooperation with the respective practical stakeholders clearly directed the internships to some fields (e.g., fire and rescue), whereas in social science-oriented research universities the students tend to attend a more varied number of sectors. Our data, and the limitations related to the sample, do not provide enough evidence to conclude anything more about the internship fields.

The questionnaire also assessed the quality of the internships/training programmes accomplished by the students, which was defined in terms of competences acquired and usefulness of the skills for their future working lives. According to the assessment made by the respondents (NB study programme leaders, not the students themselves), on a scale from 1 to 10, the majority confirmed that the training programmes did indeed prepare the students at a good level. Around three-quarters of the respondents assessed this at 7 or higher. Only in one case was there a perception of complete dissatisfaction. A more concrete question about the effect of the internship is whether it helped the graduates to find work in their field. While the figures in our sample may be somewhat random and insufficiently generalisable, the results show that at least the study leaders' perceptions and knowledge support the idea that internships are rather effective ways of finding a first job for the graduates in their own field. These results are summarised in Figure 2.

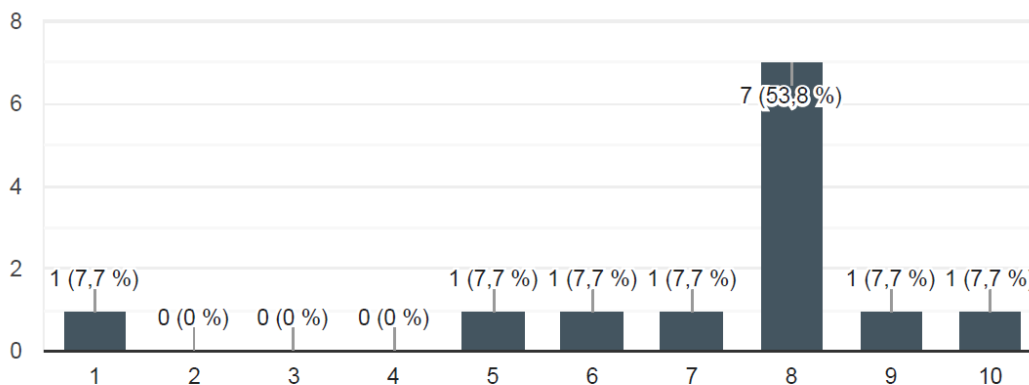


Figure 2. Study programme leaders: internships preparing students for future working life? (Metrics = persons (and %), N = 15; 0 = no positive effect; 10 = very positive effect)

The results above duly indicate that, according to the study programme leaders, internships are generally seen to bring added value to the curricula, but also have a concrete practical employability relevance for students who complete these programmes. However, some of the study leaders noted that it is sometimes difficult for their respective HEI to identify suitable internships and to justify the students' participation in these activities.

3.1.3 Pedagogical and training methods in the Societal Security study programmes

Another aspect that the questionnaire aimed to investigate is whether the study programmes include pedagogical elements that are considered to be inherently useful, or highly relevant, for developing skills and competences for a professional life in different branches of Societal Security. These relate to more practical skill-enhancing elements of the curricula that might be effective in introducing students to the work environment – besides the pure academic elements of the

studies – including activities such as exercises within the course or in the field; media training; game simulations; conferences with expert academics or practitioners; study visits at home or abroad in relevant facilities and environments; recruitment fairs; and student competitions.

The questionnaire explored these elements within the different programmes and whether or not they are considered mandatory for the successful completion of the HE degree. The answers provided by the respondents were rather varied. Generally, the pedagogical *skills training* tools available are often offered within the course, but considered mandatory to a limited extent. *Skill-based exercises* in class or online are activities that are offered to students more often, in both a mandatory and an optional manner. For some institutions in Latvia, Sweden and Poland, they are a requirement for every course, for some in Latvia and Estonia they are mandatory in almost every course, while for the majority of the other respondents they are mandatory for half of the courses or for few of them. In addition, almost all programmes offer these experiences as an optional activity within the study courses. In short, activities such as practical crisis communication exercises or evacuation exercises, for instance, are widely used in Societal Security programmes. Several programmes also provide students with access to *field skill-based exercises*, although on a less frequent basis. These activities are a particular feature in more vocationally oriented institutions, whereas research universities arrange, or at least facilitate to some extent, the students' participation in full-scale field exercises.

The other activities paint a more varied picture, although in general it can be observed that the options are more limited when compared to the skill-based exercises. These include media training as well as simulation games, which can be found in about two-thirds of the study programmes, in both mandatory and optional parts of the curricula. *Conference participation* with expert academics or practitioners is not required in most cases for a successful completion of Societal Security courses, yet some HEIs have included this in the mandatory curricula. Similarly, *study visits* are generally not considered a priority among the responding institutions. Yet some HEIs have this activity as a part of their mandatory or voluntary curricula. Most of these visits take place within the respective country, but some respondents reported visits to other BSR countries and beyond. Finally, *recruitment fairs* are also a requirement or an option for the students in many study programmes, and are sometimes formalised in the curricula. Competitions with students from other educational institutes constitute part of the training opportunities offered by some universities, typically on a voluntary basis.

The results of the aforementioned elements as mandatory parts of the study programmes are summarised in Figure 3.

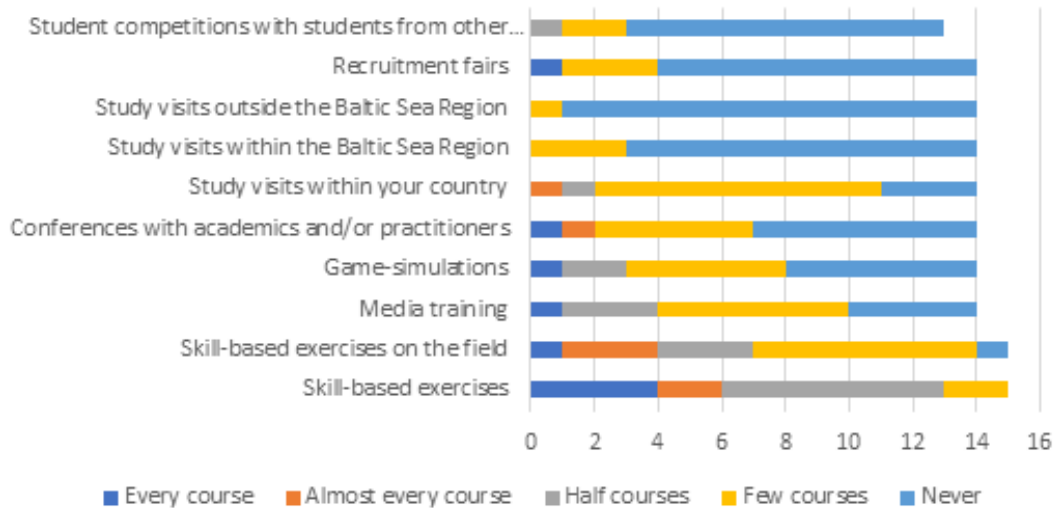


Figure 3. Study programme leaders: mandatory skill-enhancing activities (Metrics = persons, N = 15)

To conclude, there seems to be a general division between institutes that require or offer the opportunity for students to engage in a number of activities within many or some of their courses, and institutes that generally offer few of these kinds of activities. Although these figures might not be fully representative of the BSR, it appears that Estonian, Latvian and Polish HEIs are among those that provide a more varied range, in the Estonian case mostly on a voluntary basis, while as a requirement for fulfilling course criteria to some extent in Latvia and Poland. A generally wider interest in skill-based exercises can be observed, compared to study visits or student competitions. Conferences with experts are an option but are generally not considered a mandatory activity, while game simulations and media training reveal a variety of approaches depending on the institution. Finally, some respondents remarked that no exercises are offered, since Societal Security is included in other types of courses.

3.1.4 Online education

It is clear that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the Societal Security HE programmes, possibly in both negative and positive ways. On the one hand, the education system was unprepared for the crisis and the consequences it would have for pedagogical methods and performance outcomes. On the other hand, the situation accelerated the development of online solutions. Nor should one overlook the fact that the field of Societal Security as such has increased in relevance, which is already visible in an increased interest in the respective study programmes.

The questionnaire did not delve into the substance of the overall and specific impacts of the pandemic on the study programmes. However, as part of our interest in the role of online pedagogy in this field, we wanted to increase our understanding of how the courses in Societal Security have adapted their work to take account of the Covid-19 situation. As expected, respondents confirmed that all courses, or at least the vast majority of them, have transitioned to digital and/or online formats.

While in some cases planned courses were postponed or even cancelled, some respondents remarked that the more practical programme activities, such as those discussed in this report,

became more complicated during the pandemic, and exchange opportunities in particular were reduced. However, in most cases, courses that did go ahead were also implemented successfully, very often online or in another distance format.

When it comes to particular online formats for the activities, respondents seem rather satisfied with the performance of the pedagogical tools that were used during their courses. For example, *livestreamed lectures* worked well or very well for all respondents, with the exception of one study programme focusing on the practical application of occupational safety. *Pre-recorded lectures* also performed quite well, with 64.3% of respondents reporting that they were generally satisfied, and three respondents (21.4%) reporting not having tried this pedagogical method. *Online seminars* were generally satisfactory, with 71.4% of the respondents considering their performance either good or very good, and 21.4% reporting being relatively satisfied, although they would have appreciated some improvements. *Online workshops* satisfied 64.3% of the respondents, whilst 21.4% (3 respondents) had not tested this tool. However, the tool that seems to have satisfied most of the respondents, with a 92.9% approval rating, was *online supervision*. This is possibly connected to the flexibility of this method, which allows to organise the working time in a more effective way, compared to in-person tutoring. These results are summarised in Figure 4.

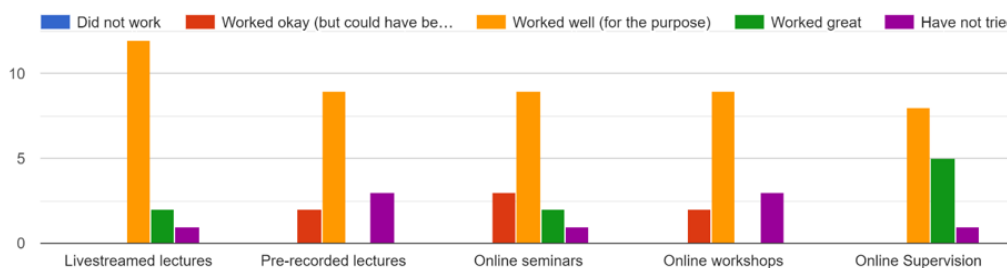


Figure 4. Study programme leaders: online teaching and learning formats (Metrics = persons, N = 15)

When it comes to the scope of the NEEDS project, which aims at developing an online course and support for online community development, one of the key questions relates to which features respondents think would be useful when developing an online course and community for teaching Societal Security issues. Overall, the features that study programme directors consider most useful are *reading materials*, *video clips*, *educational activities such as quizzes*, as well as *networking opportunities*. The majority of respondents also added that *audio materials*, for example podcasts, can be of use, as are *discussion forums*. Some respondents found the use of *peer-to-peer chat* functions relevant, although not all had tested this tool. Finally, student connections via *social media*, such as Twitter or Facebook, seemed to be considered less relevant by respondents in general, with 40% (6 responses) remarking that the tool did not appear to be particularly useful, and 13.3% unable to assess its usefulness. These results are summarised in Figure 5.

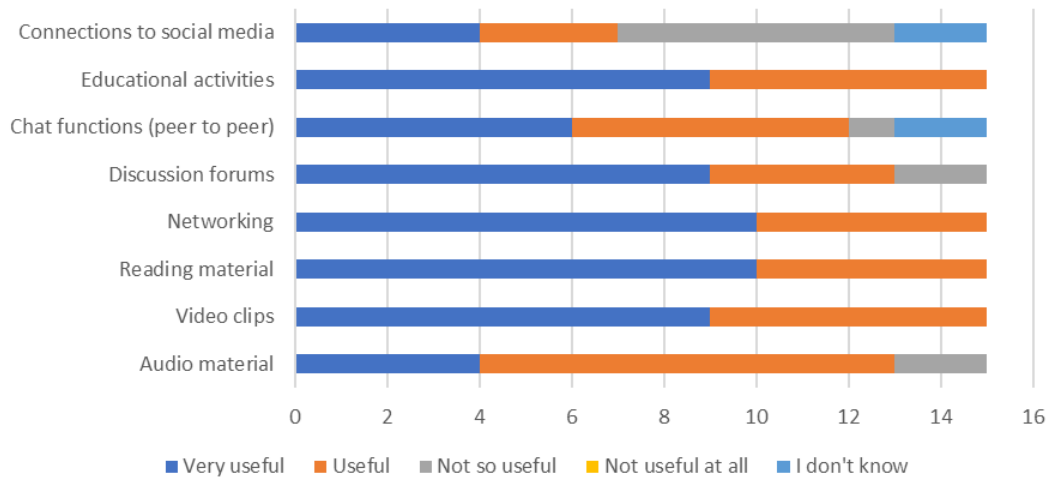


Figure 5. Study programme leaders: usefulness of online teaching and learning features (Metrics = persons, N = 15)

3.1.5 Internationalisation of curricula

As discussed above, while Societal Security often deals with national and local hazards, it also covers fundamentally transnational phenomena, with pandemics and climate change-induced hazards being the best examples. Consequently, internationalisation becomes a natural feature of study programmes. International student exchange is one of the internationalisation elements, and hence the questionnaire investigated whether the HEIs and their Societal Security study programmes provide students with opportunities for such exchanges. The majority of respondents confirmed that international exchanges are offered at least as an option and that in almost three quarters of materialised cases, they take place within Europe. It is noteworthy that more than half of the respondents also stressed that exchanges happen within the BSR, which reflects the importance of collaboration with neighbouring countries. Collaboration with countries outside of Europe is also significant, an opportunity that most of the respective HEIs provide. The results are summarised in Figure 6.

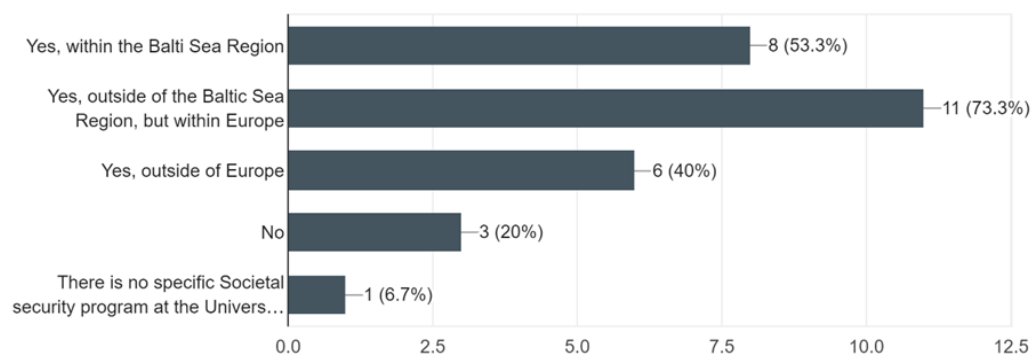


Figure 6. Study programme leaders: international exchange with other universities (Metrics = persons (and %), N = 15)

It is interesting to note the number of students who actually made use of these international training opportunities. In 2019, more than 60% of the responding institutes reported some students, generally under five per institute, who completed an international exchange. Five

respondents (out of 15) reported no international exchange, a number which rises to 10 for exchanges outside of Europe. In general, exchanges are more frequent than internships abroad, however. Around 75% of respondents reported that no students conducted their internship abroad. There is, however, considerable variation between the HEIs and the respective countries, as well as between the years (2019 vs. 2020) in this respect. In 2020, international exchange was obviously more difficult due to Covid-19, which affected the situation from March/April onwards. The results are summarised in Figures 7 and 8.

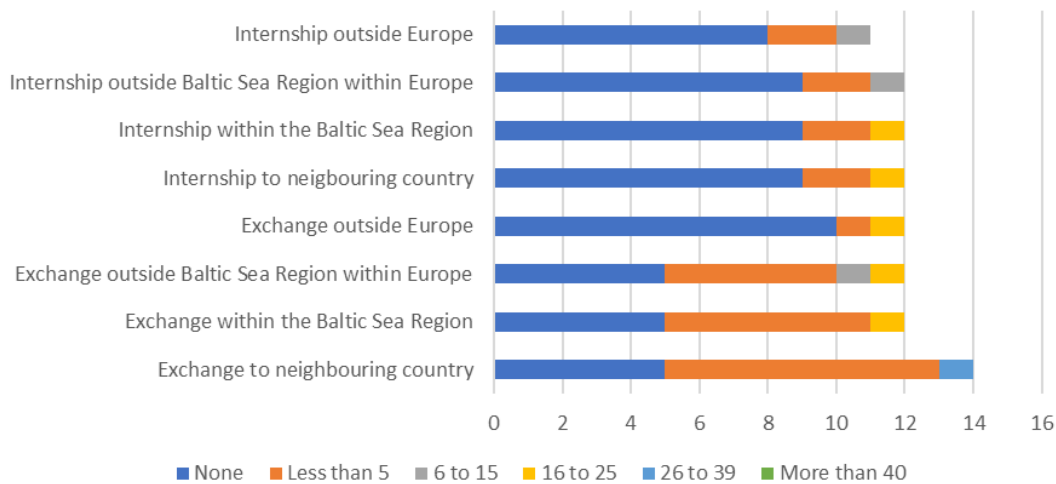


Figure 7. Study programme leaders: number of international student exchange/internships in 2019
(Metrics = number of students, study programme leader N = 15)

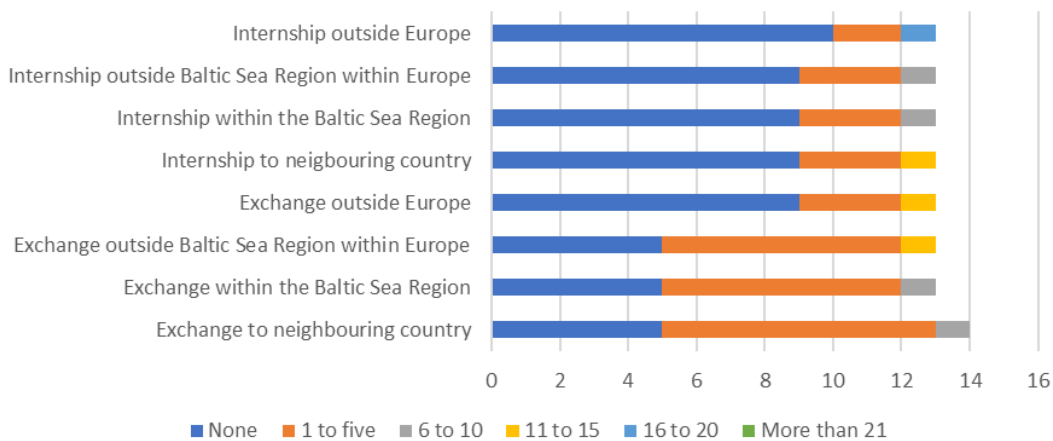


Figure 8. Study programme leaders: number of international student exchange/internships in 2020
(Metrics = number of students, study programme leader N = 15)

One positive result from the survey is that 80% of the study programme directors who responded to the questionnaire confirmed an ambition to expand international cooperation once the pandemic situation would be better under control. However, there were also diverging positions. Some universities wish to maintain the pre-pandemic level of cooperation or do not envisage the

possibility of further expansion, whereas others are not yet sure about future international cooperation.

Physical exchanges and internships are only one aspect of internationalisation in HEIs. The integration of international perspectives in the curricula is another key internationalisation element that the questionnaire sought to identify. Among the respondents, nobody reported including international elements, such as international guest lecturers, in all of their courses. On the contrary, half of the respondents indicated that these elements are never part of their classes, while the rest include them in few courses. The results are summarised in Figure 9. As Erasmus+, for instance, financially supports such activities as staff exchange for teaching, this opportunity would be worth looking into in the HEI-level systems in order to see how it could be utilised effectively.

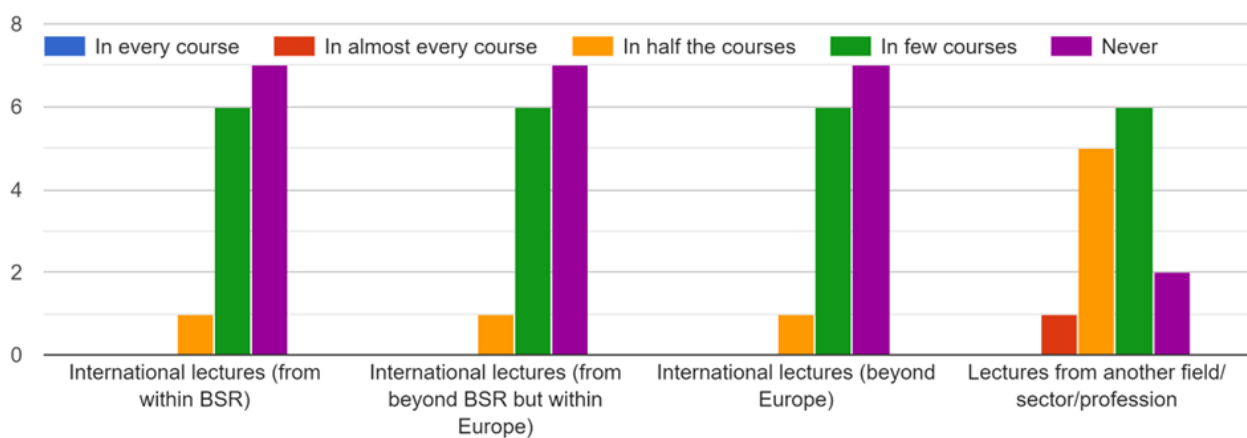


Figure 9. Study programme leaders: lectures by international guest lecturers (Metrics = study programme leaders indicating courses with guest lecturers, N = 15)

Within this context, we also included a question about cross-sectoriality (see Figure 9 above), that is, whether Societal Security HE truly provides a holistic picture of its practical fields of application. While slightly less than half of the respondents take this dimension into account, it does not seem to be a highly institutionalised principle in the respective study programmes. It therefore provides an opportunity to broaden the Societal Security curricula in many HEIs.

The results from this survey demonstrate that more work is needed to incorporate international perspectives into the Societal Security curricula of HEIs within the BSR countries, as well as the need to take cross-sectoriality more seriously into account in the curricula.

3.2 Asking the students: a summary of questionnaire results

A total of 50 students completed the survey, 15 of whom were from Norway, 12 from Sweden, 20 from Latvia, two from Finland and one from Poland. Of these, 14 were pursuing second-cycle (master's) studies, 10 first-cycle (bachelor's) studies, and 10 first-level professional higher education studies (geared to firefighters). The majority had recently started their studies (20 respondents in 2019, 16 in 2020, and 14 who had been studying for more than three years at the time of this questionnaire). It goes without saying that this sample is relatively small compared to the total number of students that can be considered to be undertaking Societal Security HE in the BSR, given the number of study programmes. Moreover, it is biased in terms of representing

the countries and study levels adequately. Nevertheless, it provides some orientation with regard to the issues discussed in the current report, which might ostensibly be generalisable more widely.

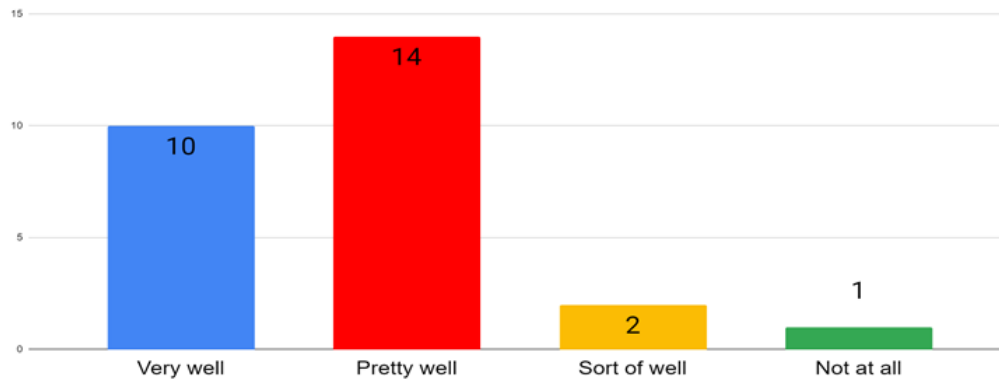
3.2.1 Internship opportunities

Let us take another look at internships and training opportunities within Societal Security study programmes in the BSR, this time from the student perspective. We can see that slightly more than half of the respondents had completed an internship/training course included in their curriculum. The two most frequent internship periods, both scoring more than 40%, were either very short internships lasting from one week to a month, or long-term periods of three months to a year, whereas internships of one to three months constituted the rest. Notable here is the fact that almost half of the students did not report any internship opportunities in their curriculum. If we compare these results to the results of the first survey, directed at study programme leaders, they reveal that most study programmes provide some opportunities to this effect, but they are often voluntary and therefore not truly integrated into the curriculum, and perhaps poorly communicated.

The majority of the respondents were doing their internships in fire and hazardous response, which reflects the inclusion of a vocational rescue college within our sample of student respondents. Other fields included education and training, research, private security companies, critical infrastructure protection, strategic planning and coordination, and policy and decision-making, among others. This largely corresponds with the perceptions of the study programme leaders. The majority of the respondents found their internship via their student-time employer (in the field of Societal Security) or via their HEI, while some utilised other personal contacts or found their internship host individually via the internet by studying websites. More than half of the student respondents nonetheless considered that their HEI had done extremely well, or at least well in preparing them for their internships.

The above-mentioned notions clearly open a window for development. For example, there is potential in making internships mandatory, as well as in informing the students more comprehensively about the available opportunities. Ultimately, the results speak for the need to better integrate internships into the curricula and for the proper, institutionalised facilitation of internships by the respective HEI. In order to succeed, this requires more institutionalised relationships between the HEIs and employers, as discussed in chapter 2 above.

Perhaps a more interesting and generalisable issue is the perceived success of the internship in terms of developing those skills that would be important for the student's future working life. We used the scale 'very well – pretty well – sort of well – not at all' in terms of how well the experience reached the expected level. As for the *general experience*, an overwhelming majority of about 90% responded with very well/pretty well as to whether the internship was useful for their future working life, as shown in Figure 10.



*Figure 10. Students: satisfaction with internship in terms of developing skills for future working life
(Metrics = persons, N = 27)*

When asked in further detail about the particular skills and elements of the experience, the majority of students that had undertaken an internship considered that it facilitated the development of their *analytical skills* at least pretty well, and the rest were divided between very well and sort or (or relatively) well. This relatively positive result may be attributed to the fact that many were exposed to real-life situations in which they needed to utilise their analytical skills in managing or addressing certain concrete issues. As for learning such skills as *workplace etiquette*, the result was similarly very positive, and even more so in terms of a specific skill such as completing tasks by a deadline. A similar pattern was observed when asking about *gaining an insight into the respective industry/sector*. When it came to the skill or experience of *making decisions under pressure*, about half of the respondents evaluated this learning result as pretty well, and most of the others as either very well or relatively well. Obviously, this result reflects rather limited decision-making in keeping with the internship status. Similarly, a very positive result was obtained when respondents considered whether the internship had helped them to develop their *group cooperation skills*. It is notable that this evaluation took place despite the fact that the pandemic clearly limited networking and interaction.

3.2.2 Pedagogical and training methods in the Societal Security study programmes

Given the practical nature of Societal Security, *exercises* of different kinds constitute – or could constitute – a natural part of the education programmes. Obviously, the more vocational or practical the study programme, the more such exercises are added to curricula as permanent and mandatory parts, whereas research universities may have a more theoretical approach to exercises, sometimes including some voluntary or smaller-scale ones. We included three categories with respective questions for the students, namely whether they had participated in *skills-based exercises*, *field exercises*, and *scenario-based exercises*. While most of the respondents stated that they had engaged in mandatory skills-based exercises in their training, slightly less than a third noted that they had never undertaken such exercises. Scenario-based exercises in turn, aimed at adding concrete elements to the exercise and applicable even in a classroom and in that sense rather inexpensive, are useful for preparing students for real crisis management. While most of the student respondents had experienced some kind of scenario-based exercise in their study programme, a fifth of them had not. The field exercise in turn is a much more demanding kind of activity, aimed at closely simulating a real-life crisis. Slightly more than half of the respondents did not have such exercises in their mandatory curricula. *Media*

training, as a part of crisis and risk management and communication, is a theme that occurs increasingly in one form or another in Societal Security education, particularly in social science-oriented study programmes. In our survey, around 65% had no experience of this in their curricula, most probably because many of the study programmes were of an engineering orientation. By contrast, serious *game simulations*, which can be used to simulate decision-making in times of crisis, were included in the curricula according to half of the respondents, at least occasionally. When it came to participating in *conferences with academics and practitioners*, almost 45% of respondents indicated that this had never been included in the curricula, whereas others had experienced it at least in some form. New digital tools enable greater student participation since the obstacle and cost of travelling and inviting external speakers is minimised. When asked about such activities as *recruitment fairs*, a clear majority of 65% had never experienced these in their curricula. The picture was the same when it came to the issue of *domestic study visits*. When asking about the same skills as above in terms of voluntary but facilitated activities related to the curricula, the results indicated slightly higher numbers, but no bigger difference.

We also asked the students whether they were satisfied with the quantity of activities such as those described above in their curricula. An overwhelming number of respondents, more than 75%, expressed dissatisfaction, as summarised in Figure 11.

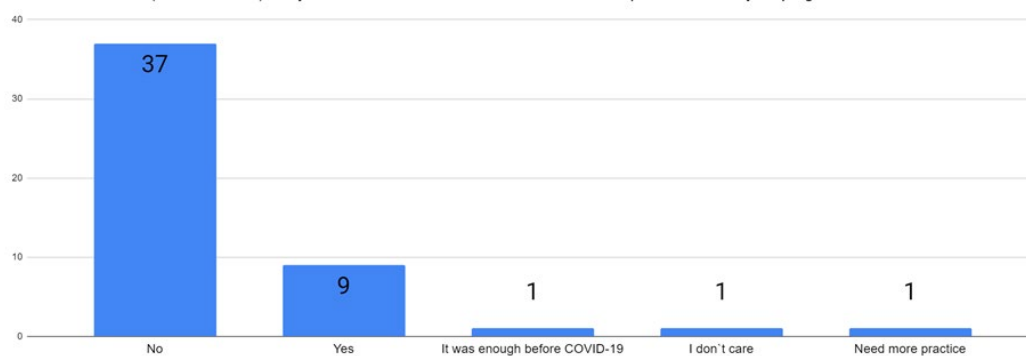


Figure 11. Students: satisfaction with field/skill-specific activities (Metrics = persons, N = 49)

However, we also asked the students about their perceptions of whether such activities had prepared them for their future working life. While 60% were positive, over a third did not regard them as useful for that purpose, as summarised in Figure 12.

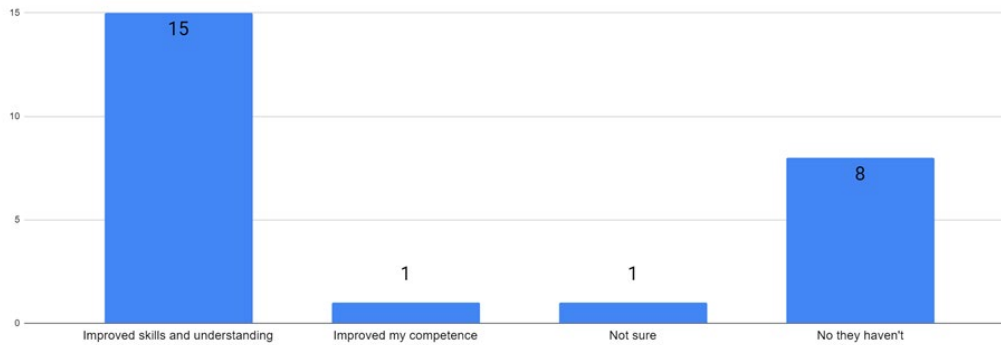


Figure 12. Students: perceptions of the study programme's ability to prepare for working life (Metrics = persons, N = 25)

The above results (Figure 11) indicate that there is a lot of scope for adding such skills-development elements to mandatory and extra-curricular pedagogical activities to enhance the non-traditional pedagogical methods, and potentially the employability of graduates. One might also consider that there is room for developing not only the quantity but also the quality of these types of activities (Figure 12), emphasising their employability-enhancing elements. This might be achieved rather easily, for instance by creating certification-based skills exercises and similar elements.

When it came to whether the students in our sample considered multidisciplinary an important element of Societal Security studies, the results were strikingly mixed and inconclusive. This mirrors the results obtained when asking the study programme leaders about cross-sectoral lectures. The findings may reflect the large number of engineering and vocational study programmes in our sample, but the multidisciplinary nature of Societal Security should nonetheless be considered more seriously in the study programmes because if the scope or understanding of the discipline is too limited, it will ultimately hinder the skills and the employability of graduates in this field.

3.2.3 Online education

Almost all of the student respondents indicated that they had transitioned to digital and/or online formats for their studies during the 2020/2021 Covid-19 pandemic, being active on the respective platforms on a daily or weekly basis. Typical Zoom/Teams lectures seem to be rather well received, compared to a variety of more individual eLearning alternatives. These results are summarised in Figure 13.

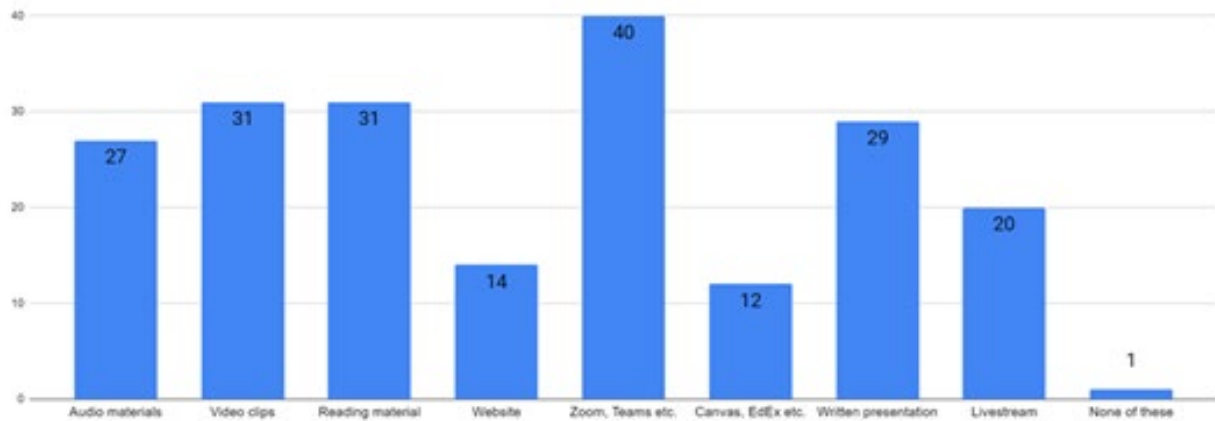


Figure 13. Students: preferred online materials and platforms (Metrics = persons, N = 50, multiple answer options allowed)

We also asked students about the specific types of online activity that they would prefer, particularly in relation to Societal Security studies. A great majority were positively disposed towards different kinds of *discussion fora*, *peer-to-peer chat platforms*, and *audio material* such as podcasts, and suggested that *research literature* could be transmitted and used in these contexts. Most wanted the online platforms to provide more opportunities for *information sharing*, *competence development*, *networking* and *cooperation*.

Furthermore, most of the respondents indicated that typical social media platforms (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube etc.) were important in this context, as summarised in Figure 14. Slightly more than half thought that social media would be appropriate for use in HE in terms of teaching and learning.

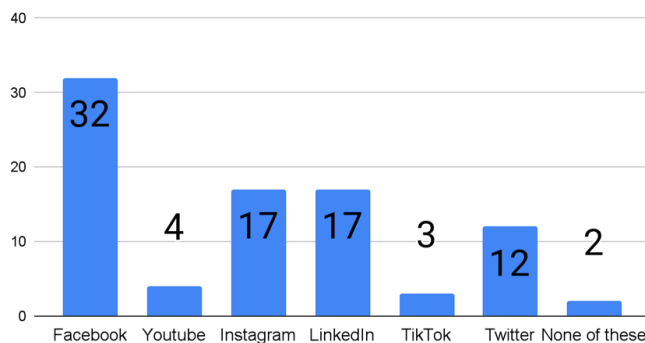


Figure 14. Students: use of social media for professional interests (Metrics = persons, N = 50, multiple answer options allowed)

3.2.4 Internationalisation of curricula

In our survey, 58% of respondents stated that their study programme offers an opportunity for either short-term, medium-term and/or long-term *international exchange studies*, such as Erasmus+ exchanges. While 6% indicated that this was not the case, 30% did not know whether they had this opportunity. Clearly, the international exchange opportunities exist, but information

about them is not sufficiently disseminated by the HEIs, and international exchange as an option is not truly integrated into the curricula. While it seems reasonable to maintain this activity as a voluntary element in the curricula, a closer look at the situation reveals that the HEIs should be better equipped to offer alternatives, for example in terms of institutionalised agreements about the available exchange opportunities in foreign HEIs and the respective recommended courses.

As for other activities related to the internationalisation of Societal Security education in the BSR, our survey revealed that *study visits to other countries* are essentially non-existent. Naturally, the pandemic limited any such activities, but this does not seem to be the main reason. Most educational institutes have neither the funds nor the staff resources to support voluntary and/or mandatory study visits to other countries, even if the value of such activities is deemed high by 56% of respondents.

A great majority of the respondents stated that they use *international curriculum literature* and other material such as videos (particularly YouTube), at least to some extent. However, as the results of the study programme leader survey showed, the study programmes hardly ever make specific efforts to internationalise their courses in terms of including *guest lecturers from other countries*, for instance. The results from our sample of students, when asked whether they would appreciate such lectures, are mixed. Obviously, language barriers may explain the results to some extent, although our survey results were inconclusive in this respect. When we asked the students more generally whether the perceived *international profile* of the study programme had played any part when they originally chose their course, around 35% considered this element unimportant, while the remaining 65% did so to varying degrees.

4 Conclusions

This report has summarised the main findings of two questionnaires, which gathered input and feedback on Societal Security study programmes in HEIs in countries in the BSR. The first questionnaire targeted the study programme leaders, whereas the second was directed towards students of these programmes. In particular, the questionnaires aimed to better understand student-practice interfaces, to address the competences and skills that the responding institutes require and provide for the students on their courses, as well as the level of internationalisation of Societal Security studies in the HEIs in question.

The questionnaire completed by the study programme leaders confirms that the criteria for being admitted onto these courses generally focus on the prior academic merits of the students, although practical competence is also taken into consideration. Some of the study programmes are specifically targeted at those already in a safety and/or security profession, who want to improve their qualifications and career prospects. Added to this are those study programmes that are more vocationally oriented and those that are more academic, as well as the rather strict division between social sciences and engineering-oriented study programmes, all of which serves to make the field of Societal Security in HE rather fragmented. Given that in working life the professional often has to function at the intersection of many knowledge areas in this field – such as administration, decision-making, strategic planning, communication, and technology applications – it would be advisable to develop the curricula in a more interdisciplinary, multidimensional and holistic direction.

During the study programmes, students are often offered internship opportunities within institutions of relevance for capacity-building in the field, including fire and hazardous response services, governance, and private security companies, to mention just a few. The main idea is to enhance the graduates' employability by giving them more hands-on experience in those tasks that will be needed in their future work. The study programme leaders saw these kinds of experiences as useful for their students, since skills were indeed acquired and trained, and it was not uncommon for students to develop relevant contacts for an employment opportunity in the sector. The results of the student survey mainly confirm the above, but they were perhaps more critical in terms of the availability and quality of internships. One could recommend that HEIs should facilitate these internships by integrating the relevant employers more effectively into the planning process, monitoring the student learning outcomes, and developing the systems based on the results and feedback. Better facilitation between the HEIs and employers would be an obvious win-win, not only in terms of enhancing the efficiency of the internships but also in preparing the graduates more effectively for their first job.

The questionnaires also inquired about the existence, within courses and programmes in the field of Societal Security, of a range of activities that help students to acquire practice-oriented skills. The results revealed that several methods are indeed in use among HEIs, including skill-based exercises in class or in the field, study visits, media training courses, game simulations and student competitions. These activities are often optional within many of the courses in the study programmes, but it is not uncommon for such activities to be mandatory for successful completion of the course. The student survey unequivocally indicated that students feel that practical skills development of this kind is insufficient in the curricula. It would be advisable therefore to take this aspect into account in the planning of studies and courses, namely to include at least some practical application of the theoretical and conceptual knowledge in the programme.

A further subject of interest was the state of the online education in the current field. Unsurprisingly, the Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on the activities in all the study programmes. The online training included the use of livestreamed or pre-recorded lectures, online seminars and workshops, and online supervision, among others. Respondents also commented on the usefulness of some of the pedagogical tools used during these online activities, where reading materials and networking appeared to be particularly popular, together with the use of video and audio material, educational activities such as quizzes, and discussion forums. It would be advisable to include these elements when developing an online course and community, and for helping Societal Security students to achieve adequate training through such courses or in hybrid online/physical variations.

Finally, we were interested in the level of internationalisation of the respective study programmes, with the presupposition that the field as such is fundamentally transnational or global, and that adding international elements to the study programmes would better prepare the students for their working life. The most obvious form of internationalisation for students is an exchange period in a foreign university. Indeed, most HEIs have this opportunity, but it is not fully utilised. Besides this, adding such elements as international guest lecturers, a generally more transnational approach to the courses, possibly including study visits to neighbouring countries or international summer schools, among others, could prepare students for this increasingly important element of Societal Security. Our surveys showed that while all of the above elements can be found in principle in almost all study programmes, they are both underused and underdeveloped. It could be recommended that programmes such as Erasmus+ could be routinely used in this field for

enabling both student and lecturer exchange. Furthermore, as online education is seemingly here to stay in HE, at least to some extent, nothing would be easier than including relevant international guest lecturers in the course programmes.

To summarise, the current report recommends taking the above elements seriously, institutionalising them in the Societal Security study programmes, and making use of the good practices that can rather easily be found in the BSR HEIs within the current field and beyond. Increasing these practical aspects of the study programmes would help HEIs, students and employers alike to contribute to the development of the knowledge and skills that are needed in Societal Security, enhance the employability of graduates, and bolster the relevance of Societal Security as an HE field.



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