



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

BUILDING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES:
SHARING GOOD PRACTICES
2019-1-BG01-KA205-062110

REPORT

STANDPOINTS OF YOUNG PEOPLE ON LIVING ABROAD

Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS	2
GENERAL INFORMATION	2
LIVING IN ANOTHER CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT	5
CONCLUSION	11

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use, which may be made of the information contained therein.



INTRODUCTION

Building Intercultural Competences: Exchange of good practices is an international project funded under Erasmus+ Programme (KA2: Exchange of good practices in the field of youth), which aims to help young people understand the importance of social inclusion and cultural diversity and build intercultural competences.

As part of the project activities, an international survey was conducted among young people in six European countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Malta, North Macedonia and Portugal) in the period December 2019 – March 2020. The questionnaire includes 19 questions divided into two sections: general information and experience abroad. The distribution of the entries by country are as follow:

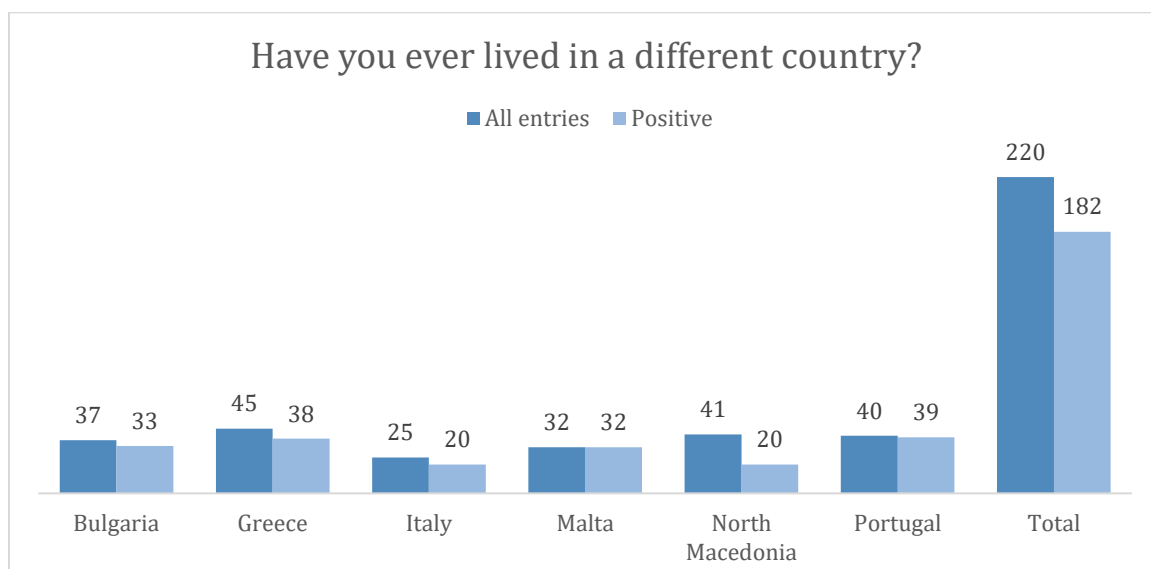


Figure 1. Living in a different country.

The survey aimed at identifying young people's feelings, difficulties and experiences when arriving in a new cultural environment. The respondents' answers reveal that living in another country could be difficult and challenging but, after all, it is a life-changing experience, which opens your mind to other people and cultures and breaks all stereotypes and prejudices.



SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

GENERAL INFORMATION

Two hundred and twenty young people concluded the questionnaire. The eligibility criteria for considering the entry was the positive answer to the question “Have you ever lived abroad”. In this regard, 182 entries (82.73% of all respondents) are analyzed further in this report.

The profile of the participants in the questionnaire shows their diverse character, which attests for the quality of the results regarding personal feelings and struggles of those young people put in different international situations. The average age of the respondents is 26. Most of the participants are female (111, 70% of all respondents), while 70 are male and one respondent did not provide that information.

The sample of answers is very wide-ranging as the participants in the survey come from 44 different countries. Most of the respondents were born in Portugal, Italy, Greece, North Macedonia and Germany. However, 18 of them (10%) stated in their answers that they have been raised in another country. Furthermore, 71 young people (39%) currently live in another country compared to the one they have been raised in.

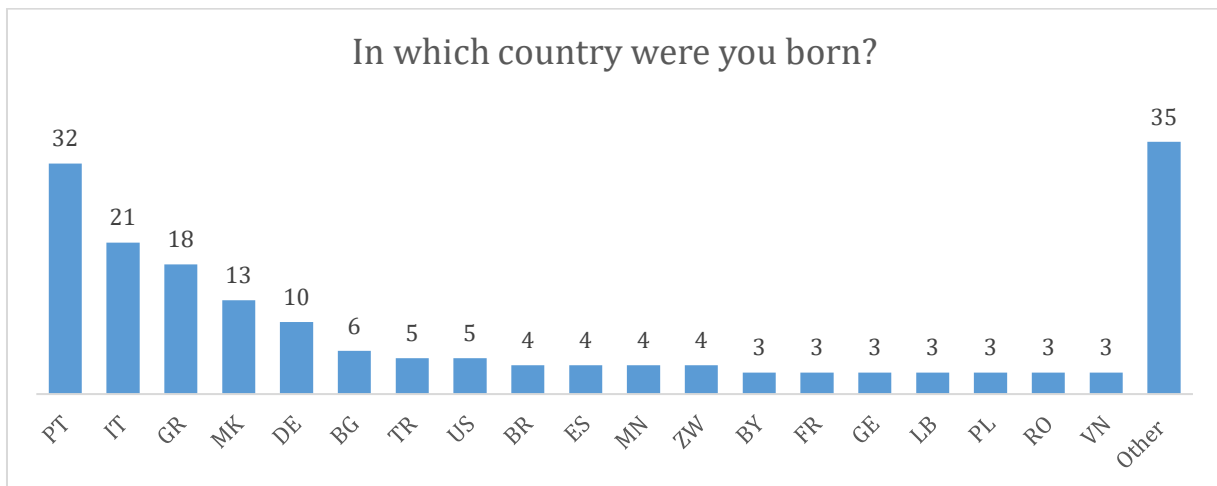


Figure 2. The country of origin of the respondents. Countries are abbreviated according to ISO 3166 country codes.

All eligible respondents have spent time in another cultural environment. They have lived in 50 different countries. The most answers in the sample encounter Bulgaria, Spain, the UK, Germany, France, and Malta.

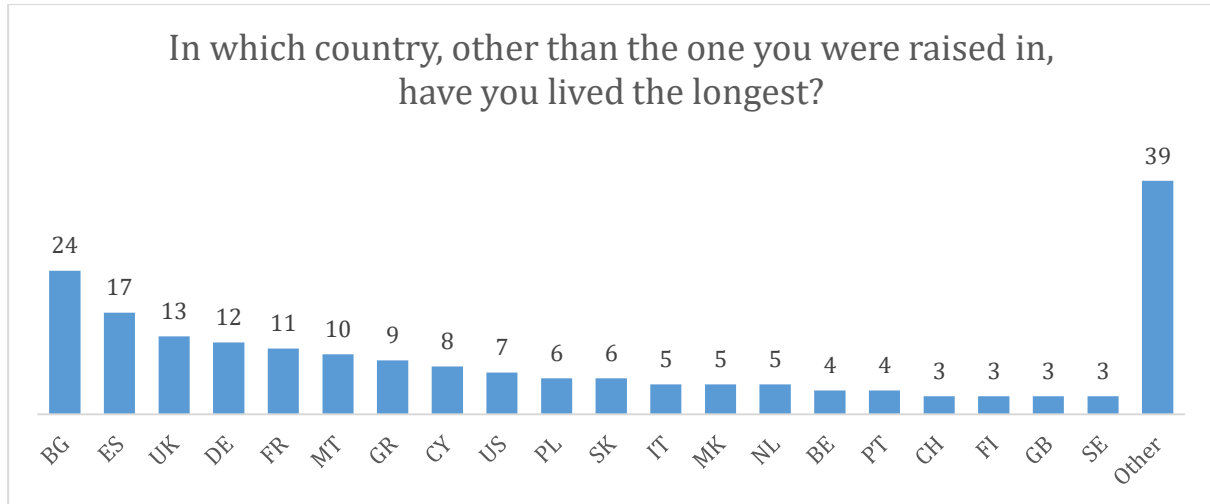


Figure 3. The country where the respondents have lived the longest. Countries are abbreviated according to ISO 3166 country codes.

Young people have spent 17.5 months on average abroad. As the majority of answers shows that young people have travelled to study, work or volunteering abroad, most of the respondents state that they have lived up to 6 months in another country.

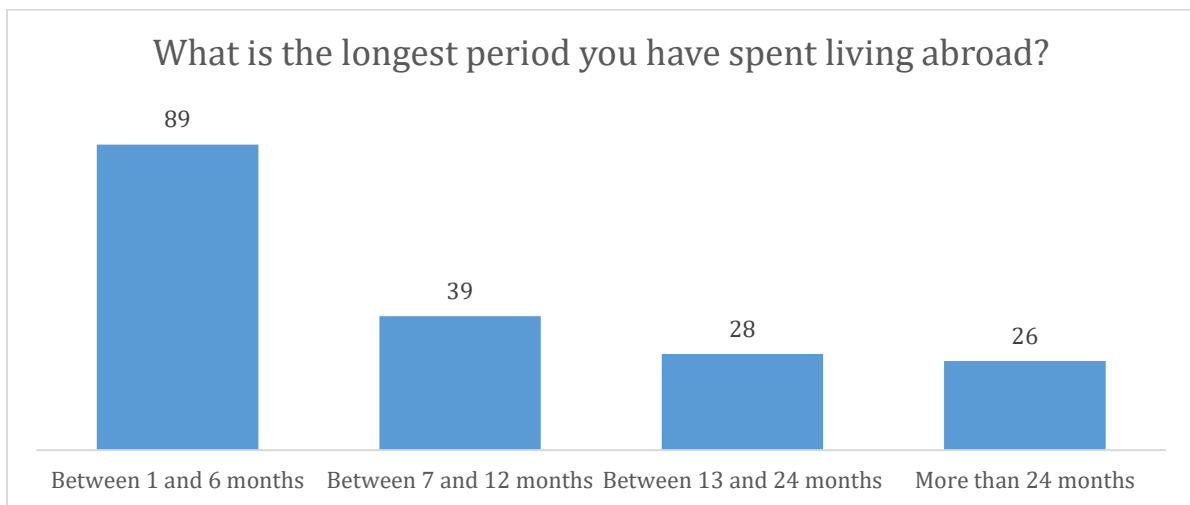


Figure 4. The period spent abroad by the respondents.

The main reasons for moving to another country are predominantly education (for instance studying at a university or Erasmus semester abroad), gaining experience (internships, volunteering), work, family (moving of parents, marriage), peace (political reasons, unstable situation in the home country). Some respondents give more than one answer as they have combined studying with gaining a work experience.

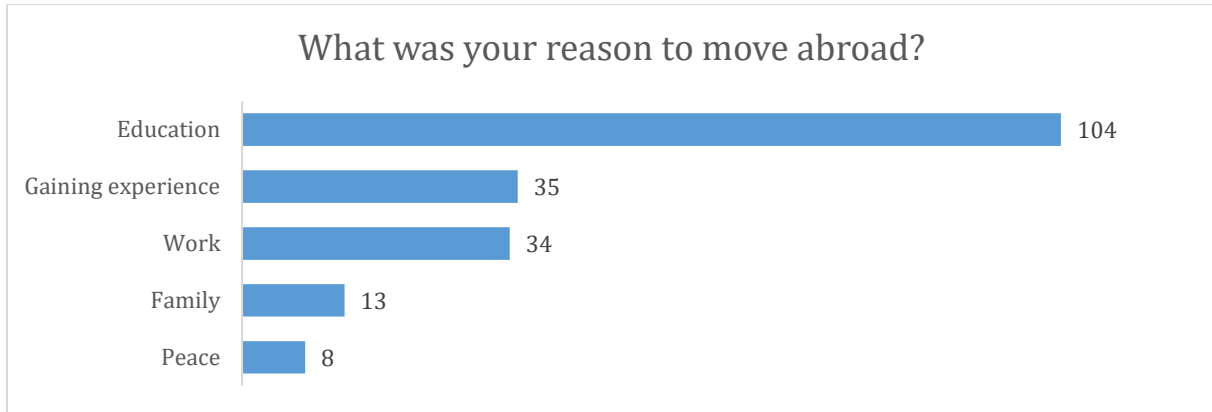


Figure 5. Reasons for moving abroad.

The general information provided in the survey can be classified as sufficient and comprehensive. The diverse profile of the respondents attests for eligibility of the results. In the light of intercultural studies, the sample of answers gives a broader perspective on how young people perceive, cope and gain experience in a foreign country. The next section in this report highlights the personal traits of living in another cultural environment.



LIVING IN ANOTHER CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Moving to another country is always fraught with worries, anxieties and anticipation. When it comes to young people, usually, they are eager to discover, experience something new, learn and improve their skills and competences. Depending on the circumstances, the stay in another country can be positive or negative but the gained experience reflects on the personality, allows for growing up and getting to know the world around us and ourselves.

The second section of the survey includes 10 questions concentrating on the individual experience of the respondents during their living abroad. Most of the questions are open-ended, which necessitated their analysis and unification. Presented quotes aim to convey the individual feelings and thoughts on concrete situations and overall experiences of the respondents.

Immediately before leaving for another country, every person shows curiosity and looks for information and resources, which can help in the first days and weeks after arrival in the new environment. In that regard, young people are asked about what kind of preparation they have received before moving to another country. Unsurprisingly, the most common method for getting information is through the internet. Many young people decide to discuss their moving abroad with people who have travelled or currently live in the new country. In some cases, the young people receive information from an institution. Only 10% of the respondent does not receive any preparation before moving to the new cultural environment, especially when they have moved for a family reunion or because of peaceful reasons.

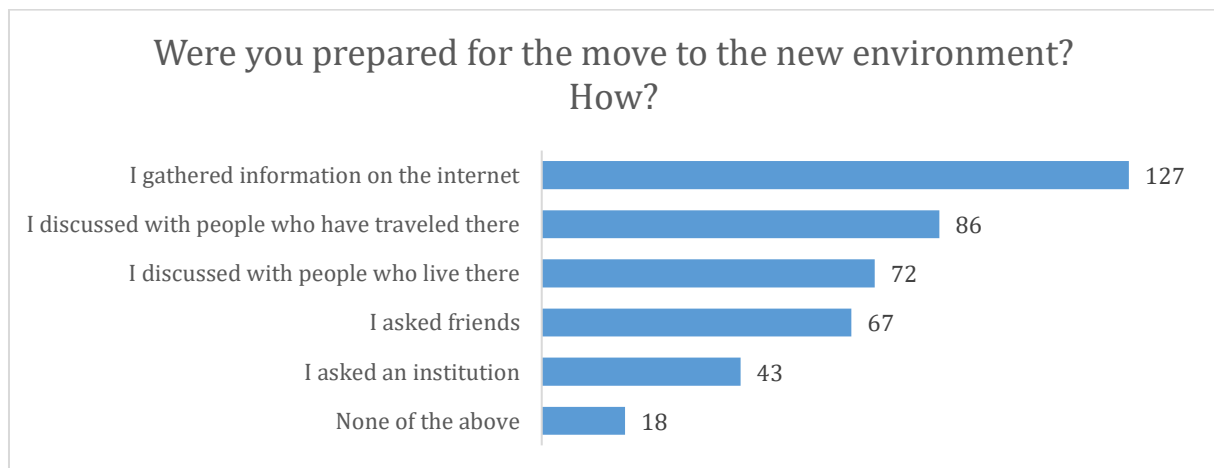


Figure 6. Types of preparation before moving to the new environment.

When arrived in another country, young people can receive additional preparation to adjust to the new cultural environment. This is true especially for the young people who moved to another country to study, volunteer or conduct a traineeship. The introductory meeting is the most common approach for integrating newcomers, followed by reading and handouts and guided tours. Almost 18% of the respondents have attended repeated meetings during their stay abroad.

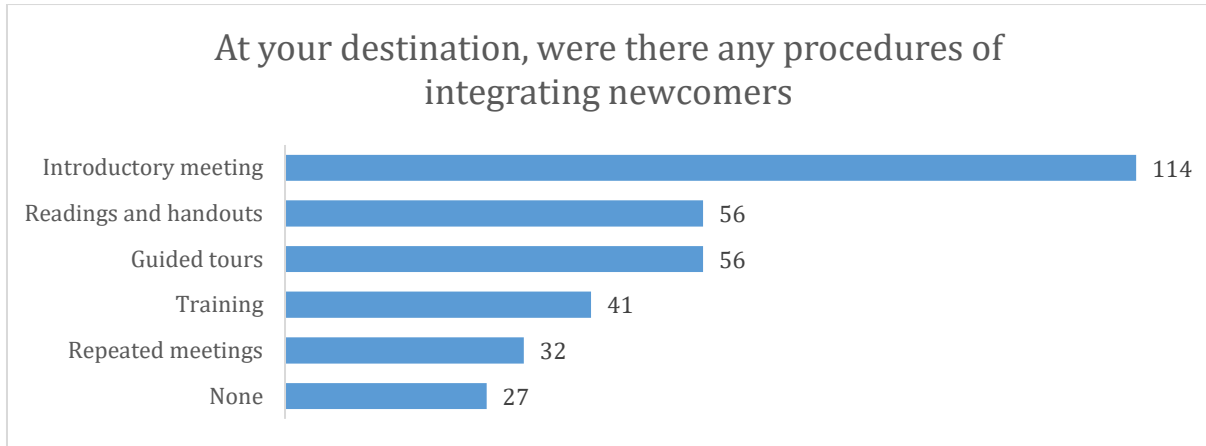


Figure 7. Types of procedures for integrating newcomers.

The respondents are asked about their feelings in the first days of living in the new cultural environment. The open question allows for sharing their unique views on living abroad. It is not surprising that the most common feelings are excitement, happiness and curiosity. However, many young people have also experienced fear, scare and disorientation during the first days and weeks of their arrival.

From the answers, we can conclude that most of the respondents had positive feelings (77, 42%), followed by those who experienced mixed feelings (52, 29%). Finally, one-fourth of the young people share only negative feelings (44, 24%). It is interesting that 11 respondents are aware that they have been going through a cultural shock.

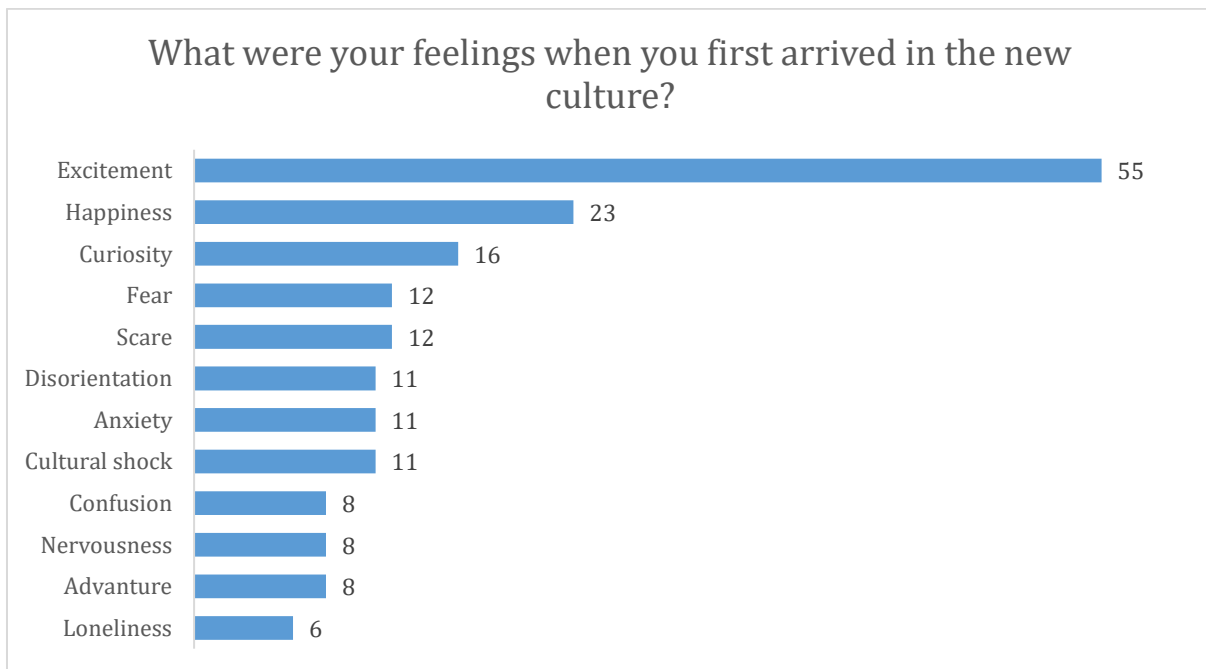


Figure 8. Respondents' feelings at their arrival. The answers are uniform.

Moving to another country is usually accompanied by some problems, conflicts, or periods of adjustments. More than half of the young people (63%) share that they have experienced



difficulties in the new cultural environment. The most common trouble for the respondents is the language barrier. They also have faced problems in adjusting to a different culture, e.g. attitudes, values, mentality, habits, lifestyle, manners, greetings, interpersonal relations, food, religion, body language, even sense of humor.

A respondent from Italy who went to Zambia for volunteering shares: *'Differences in attitude towards work, religion and in sense of humor, which make conversations difficult and embarrassing'*.

Another one from Portugal who spent two months in Egypt says that *'The country was completely different from what I was used to, religion, culture, heat, I was often misunderstood, or there were things that the culture was different and I had to respect'*.

The majority of issues are related to cultural differences; however, the change of climate was also a challenge for some of the respondents. The difficulties of making new friends and missing family and social circles often brought feelings of isolation and loneliness. Of course, problems that are more practical have also persisted in the sample of answers such as the educational system, finding accommodation, bureaucracy, working hours, coffee time, currency, government system, etc.

A respondent from Greece who moved to France for studies shares: *'The subject of language (though I spoke French, the level of daily life was particularly demanding), finding a house and the bureaucratic processes, being dealt as a "foreigner" with all the stereotypes that follow Greek culture, meeting people with whom I thought I fit in and not just to hang out.'*

Unfortunately, some respondents have felt no respect, discrimination, even racism during their stay abroad. Those who come from busier cities, needed time to adjust to a slower pace of life and more unstructured time, on the contrary, for others the new place appeared to be a more active and stressful environment. Similarly, living alone was a challenge for some respondents, while others complained of a lack of personal space.

A Portuguese who studied in Belgium says *'After being there, I came to the conclusion that the Belgians live a lifestyle very focused on work. Not that this is negative, but I felt that there was not as great a relationship between people as there is in my country'*.

Some young people report a failure to understand the perspective of others, their way of thinking, friendship differences, and the level of sociability of the locals.

Usually, we find support from our family and friends in the most difficult times. Moving to another country is an event, which imposes dramatic changes to our way of living. It is possible at some point to experience unpleasant emotions and even show aggression. In that regard, we ask the respondents to share whether they experience some negative emotions (listed in the question). The most common states that young people have experienced during their stay abroad are anxiety, feeling of tiredness, and isolation. Many have also felt helpless and had sleeping problems. Anger and aggression almost do not appear in the answers. Only 15% of the respondents do not report any of the listed negative emotions and barriers.

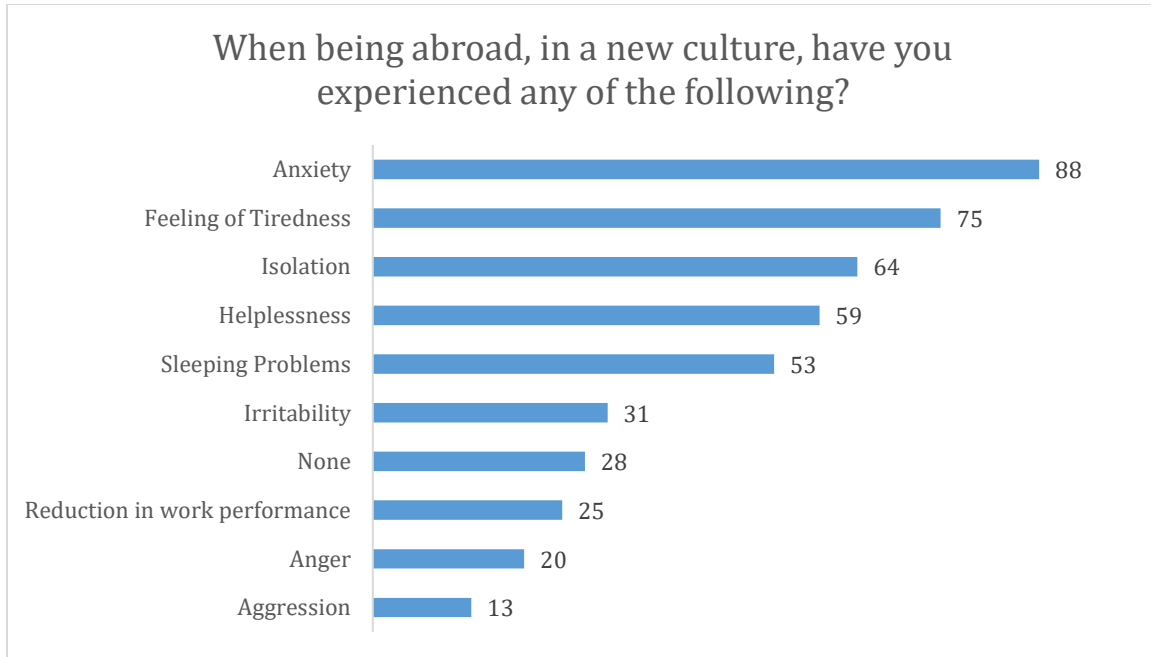


Figure 9. Respondents' negative emotions.

In another question, we ask the young people whether they have had any interpersonal conflicts, based on culture. 73 of the respondents (40%) share that they have gone through such conflicts. The young people have used different strategies to overcome or minimize interpersonal conflicts. Some of them dedicate time to learn more about the new culture, have discussions with the involved parties, rely on open communication or avoid the confrontation, get to know and learn from the locals. Others just get used to the conflicts realizing that they are living in a different cultural environment and sometimes conflicts cannot be avoided. For many respondents, adaptation to the new culture, dialogue, solving the conflict with humor, showing respect to other people's culture, investing effort and repetition are successful tools in conflict management. Some respondents discuss their problems with family and friends.

A respondent from the US who has spent more than a year in North Macedonia as a volunteer says that *'I experience this frequently at work, and manage them by trying to understand their point of view, being persistent and doing activities on my own if necessary'*.

Breaking stereotypes is another long-term process and a strategy, which can be used for avoiding conflict. For instance, a respondent from North Macedonia who moved to Malta with his family shares *'At school, my headmaster treated me like I was from a poor family which couldn't afford basic school necessities. Without asking, he would refer me to the school charity office although I told him my dad worked for a bank and my mum had a good job with an NGO. I used to ignore him until he realized that I was well cared for and I didn't need anything from the charity'*.

An interesting issue that appears across the answers is the perception of touching in the different cultures. Young people who belong to cultures, in which touching and warm



greetings (as hugs and kisses) are the cultural norms, find other people cooler and less sociable. On the contrary, others complain about the disruption of their personal space when in a new cultural environment.

For instance, a respondent from Portugal who has spent time in Egypt shares *'Yes, the space issue for them was not the same as ours, so they often invaded our personal space with touches, etc. What I did was to confront the person and mention that in our culture it is not acceptable what they were doing'*.

The intercultural conflict is a two-way interaction. Even if a person tries to resolve it, another one could not accept the resolution. In this situation, it is impossible for the conflict to be managed. Respondents report also for situations, in which the conflicts have escalated to fighting or total alienation. Sadly, six respondents report that they have been victims of discrimination and sexual harassment and they have become ignorant to resolve those situations.

A respondent from Portugal who have studied in Poland shares that he experiences *'Discrimination based on nationality. It was resolved either through contempt or by being accompanied by more people'*.

Another one from India who studied in Bulgaria says that *'The moment I have landed and until now I have faced intolerance, verbal abuse, discrimination and physical assault from certain southeast Asians. I have managed by disassociating with them'*.

Respondents also mention that sometimes the interpersonal conflicts are not involving the 'host' community. They can arise between people who are roommates, co-workers, etc. and belong to a third culture. Being both of them foreigners makes them more sensitive to other people saying or doing. However, communication is the most common and powerful tool for conflict resolution.

In another question, we ask the respondents whether they have experienced any cultural norms that they were not aware of, 90 of them (49%) answer positively. The respondents point out body language, local gestures, which could be even opposite to the ones respondents have in their countries, different sensitivity on issues (for instance politics), and the attitudes to personal space.

A respondent from Bulgaria who moved to Greece for studying shares: *'Well, the new body language was definitely a style and communication code I lacked understanding. When people on the street used to nod their heads to respond to my questions I never felt I was getting them at all. Then one more thing was the direct personal questions that I used to receive, as a way of socializing... I was definitely not ready to respond to all of these as I felt too much intrusive all the "interview" what are your parents doing, how much is your salary, what do you do for a living, all of the above in the first 5 minutes of meeting somebody'*.

Other cultural norms mentioned are the levels of hospitality, gastronomy, eating hours, recycling and other habits, and different rules of behavior on the streets. The religious



practices, different holidays, and ways of celebrations, as well as, the attitude to LGTB community and feminism also have represented challenges for young people.

A respondent from Turkey who moved for several months in the US points out that *'Many different holidays that I'm not used to were celebrated during my stay which was so different to me. Also elderly were not treated like how we do in Turkish culture, parents and kids are more like friends than authority figures at home'*.

Apparently, many respondents needed time to adjust to differences in family relations, co-workers' relationships, ways of communicating with the professors at the university, as well as, the hierarchies at the workplace.

The strategies that the young people have used to overcome any issues during their stay abroad include adapting and compromising in some situations, trying to fit in, investigating more in the culture, and showing more tolerance and understanding. The respondents suggest the practice of participant observation to learn more about the new culture. Through learning people's customs, it is possible to understand them better. Many young people prefer to ignore the problems, but sometimes it is better to start a dialogue, show patience, look for help from others, and put effort or just apologize.

The respondents see the support from friends as an important condition for overcoming any problem. A young person from Portugal who has spent time in Belgium shares *'as I went there to study, I ended up making many friends with whom I keep in touch today. Once you are with friends, all these problems seem to disappear'*. Another one says *'after passing the language barrier everything became easier and I started to create more friendships'*.

Using your sense of humor can also be a successful strategy to overcome conflicts and misunderstandings. Respondents also suggest *'Communicating with others as openly as calmly as possible'* and advice *'Quietly, not panicking or jumping to conclusions'*.

Finally, 98.9% of the respondents would recommend others to have an experience abroad. Living in another cultural environment helps young people to grow up. Sometimes, this is the first time when they live all alone, or with roommates instead of their family. As a result of this experience, they become more independent and confident in themselves. When abroad, the young people learn how to embrace diversity and other cultures. The respondents describe the gained experience as life-changing, unique, and enriching.

A respondent shares *'Yes; it has been the most enriching experience of my life, and has changed me as a person in virtually every aspect of my life for the better'*.

Meeting people from other countries and making friends are other advantages because these relationships can be preserved for a long time or even for life.

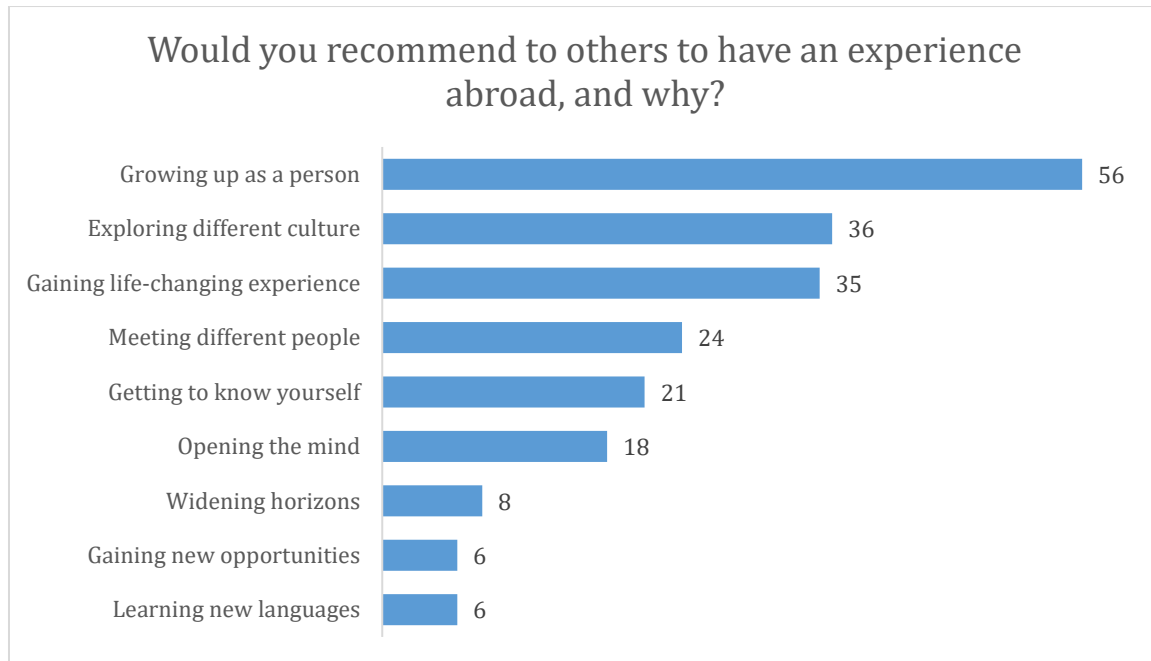


Figure 10. Reasons to recommend living abroad.

The respondents also pay attention to the opportunity to get to know themselves. As they have been in new situations away from home, many young people have discovered abilities in themselves that they were not aware of. A respondent points out: *'I absolutely recommend such experience. You never know what you are really capable of until you get out of your comfort zone, put yourself at a test, and discover that nothing can really put you down'*.

Living abroad opens the mind and widens horizons, as young people start to perceive others differently. They can also receive more opportunities to develop professionally. Even learning or improving foreign language skills is an advantage that will be rewarded in the future.

CONCLUSION

This report touches the surface of young people's inner feelings and emotions when moving to a new cultural environment. The presented data will be used for the next activities of the Building Intercultural Competences project – conducting debates with young people and creating guides for helping young people when moving to another country and youth organizations when building a multicultural environment.

The participating organizations in the project hope that other individuals and organizations who are working on the topics of cultural diversity, intercultural experience, and social inclusion can use this analysis in their work.