



European Medical Students' Association

Association Européenne des Étudiants en Médecine

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Integration of International Medical Students Across Europe

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The European Medical Students' Association (EMSA) represents medical students across Europe. We envision a healthy and solidary Europe in which medical students actively promote health. EMSA empowers medical students to advocate health in all policies, excellence in medical research, interprofessional healthcare education and the protection of human rights across Europe.

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Problem statement.

Europe remains one of the most attractive destinations for international medical students due to its high-quality education, extensive clinical training opportunities, and, in some cases, more affordable tuition fees.

Countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Central and Eastern European nations are among the top choices for international medical students. For example 58.5% of medical students in Bulgaria and 45% of health sciences students in Slovakia are international. Additionally, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland have also become increasingly popular destinations in recent years (Eurostat, September 2024), (Eurostat, August 2024), (OECD, 2019).

Most international students in Europe enroll in English-taught programs. However, in some countries where the primary language of instruction is not English, language barriers pose a significant challenge to their integration (Eurostat, September 2024), (Eurostat, August 2024), (OECD, 2019). Additionally, medical curricula across Europe differ significantly. While some countries employ a problem-based learning (PBL) approach with interactive cases, others follow a traditional curriculum structure that is lecture-heavy, making academic adaptation more challenging for international students (Eurostat, September 2024), (Eurostat, August 2024), (OECD, 2019).

International medical students in Europe frequently encounter substantial administrative obstacles, which can impede their educational and clinical training experiences. A primary challenge is the acquisition of residency permits and visas, which often necessitate extensive documentation, evidence of financial stability, and periodic renewals that may not align with academic calendars (Kalucza and Sievert, 2024).

Social integration can be another challenge, as international students may struggle to build friendships and support networks. Adapting to a new healthcare system, along with differences in lifestyle, food, and societal norms, can lead to feelings of isolation and culture shock, making mental health support and inclusion initiatives crucial for their well-being and success (University of Birmingham, 2025), (Prasath et al., 2022). These students frequently encounter systemic biases and social exclusion, limiting their participation in leadership roles, extracurricular activities, and networking opportunities (UNESCO, 2023), (UKCISA, 2024), (Great Learning, 2025).

International students often struggle with limited access to scholarships and funding, as many financial aid programs prioritize domestic students, leaving international students reliant on personal finances or high tuition fees. Additionally, employment restrictions and visa limitations prevent them from accessing part-time work opportunities, exacerbating financial difficulties (UNESCO, 2023), (UKCISA, 2024), (Great Learning, 2025).

Clinical training opportunities pose a challenge as well. In some countries, international students face restricted access to clinical rotations compared to local students. This limitation can negatively impact their practical skills development and confidence in clinical settings (Pemberton et

al., 2022), (Hashim, 2017), (OECD, 2019). International students need more supervisor support and seem to be more likely to fail their placements than their peers (Attrill et al., 2016). Especially when mentors or supervisors fail to relate to international students or portray negative behaviours, these students tend to struggle the most (Mikkonen et al., 2016). A study showed that although international medical students perform poorer in clinical skill and communication requiring assessments, after proper training they show equal or greater improvement compared to their local peers. Thus, regular and adequate procedural trainings are highly beneficial for international students' clinical competence and confidence (Nagy et al., 2021).

Additionally, cultural competence training has been recognized as a vital tool for improving communication and understanding in diverse medical settings, yet it is not uniformly integrated into medical curricula across Europe (Schouler-Ocak et al., 2015).

Addressing these disparities requires a comprehensive approach that ensures equal financial aid opportunities, inclusive academic policies, fair employment regulations, and strong social support systems. Without such interventions, international students will continue to experience systemic inequalities, limiting their academic success and overall well-being (UNESCO, 2023), (UKCISA, 2024), (Great Learning, 2025).

Our view. Aim

EMSA values the integration of international medical students across Europe as the cornerstone of building inclusive and culturally competent healthcare systems. This integration not only enriches the educational experience but also prepares future physicians to deliver patient-centered care in increasingly diverse societies. EMSA also aims to shed light on inequalities and specific challenges international students face in order to receive the education they wish to.

Through initiatives such as the Twinning Project –a bilateral exchange between two Faculty Member Organisations (FMOs) or as the Intercontinental Twinning– EMSA fosters cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect among its members.

EMSA believes that international students in medicine inevitably contribute to the diverse cohort that the modern and globalized world brings. With this paper, EMSA aims to express actions needed to be taken in order to make their processes of admission, adaptation, integration and eventual contribution to their field less complex and more fruitful.

Recommendations

EMSA calls on

The European Commission to;

- Develop a transparent and standardized student visa structure for prospective international students to utilize,
- Promote accreditation standards across Europe for international post-graduation opportunities of students by 2030,
- Allocate funding for integration initiatives directed towards international students like language training or mentorships,
- Require universities to publicly disclose scholarship and grant allocation data annually starting in 2030,
- Mandate regular impact assessments to ensure funding policies align with equity goals at least every 2 years,
- Develop guidelines to prevent discriminatory behaviours in the medical education setting, both in the theoretical and clinical phases of training.

All European Member States to;

- Implement a proportional funding system that ensures equal access for both international and domestic students,
- Require medical education institutions to set aside a minimum percentage of scholarships for international students,
- Require universities to publicly disclose scholarship and grant allocation data,
- Establish independent funding review boards to monitor and adjust policies,
- Mandate regular impact assessments to ensure funding policies align with equity goals,
- Create a more efficient, transparent visa application system for international students with clear guidelines and timelines within 3 years,
- Reduce bureaucracy by offering an online portal for students to track their visa status and receive updates throughout the process within 3 years,
- Establish clearer paths for international students to gain permanent residency or work permits after graduation,
- Prohibit medical education institutions from having separate working conditions between international and native students in their practical years.

Medical Education Institutions to;

- Provide sufficient language courses to international medical students before and after they start clinical rotations as part of preparatory years and/or integrated into their medical curricula starting in the soonest term possible,
- Provide sufficient medical communication skills training to international students starting within 2 years,
- Equip faculty members who will be supervisors with the necessary approach towards international students in the clinical setting,
- Provide sufficient counseling opportunities to international students,
- Encourage mentorship/buddy systems that pair international students with native students,
- Offer cultural competency workshops related to the medical context annually starting 2026,
- Encourage the participation of international students in student organizations,

- Create a friendly environment to international students by continuously promoting inclusivity and sensitivity among the staff and students,
- Provide clear requirements during the application process and sufficient advising for visa/residency needs,
- Create career development programs tailored to the unique needs of international students, including visa-friendly job placements,
- Provide affordable and diverse housing options, ensuring that international and domestic students are not segregated.
- Be in regular communication with immigration authorities to ensure that students receive the latest updates on visa regulations.
- Partnerships with immigration lawyers or consultants could be established to offer students expert advice and guidance, making the process less stressful.
- If the institution has a practical year and offers a salary to the students and if international students are eligible for such work, keep the working hours and income equitable between all students.

EMSA FMOs to;

- Encourage the participation of international students in local FMO activities,
- Encourage mentorship/buddy systems that pair international students with native students starting 2026,
- Help international peers with cultural adaptation and/or language needs,
- Promote international exchange programs that will broaden medical students' cultural understanding and respect.

Definitions

EMSA: European Medical Students' Association

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FMO: Faculty Member Organization

OECD: The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

PBL: Problem Based Learning

UKCISA: United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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