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IFMSA Policy Document Student Mobility

Proposed by Team of Officials

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Policy Commission

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Policy Statement

Introduction:

Globalization is an inescapable process that is changing the structure of societies. The need to prepare future physicians to improve their interaction with different populations, cultures, and health systems is increasing. Currently, in the 21st century, we observe different health challenges emerging on a global level, culminating in an urgency to provide adequate Global Health learning opportunities to medical students, particularly during Student Mobility programs. Nonetheless, a review of the literature shows the existence of different barriers in the introduction of a coherent and comprehensive internationalized approach in the medical curriculum, from visa issues to the absence of structured or recognized programs.

IFMSA Position:

The International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA) runs the largest student-run medical exchange program worldwide for almost 70 years, allowing more than 15 thousand medical students, each year, to embark on a journey to explore healthcare delivery and health systems in different cultural and social settings.

IFMSA stands to offer future healthcare professionals an opportunity to promote intercultural learning, experience in research, and cooperation amongst medical students and all health professionals. Exchange programs have been successfully improving over the years, achieving an impressive academic quality as well as a potentiation of interpersonal relationships established throughout its duration. This suggests that these programs better prepare future physicians to work in a globalized world and, taking this into account, IFMSA believes that all international Student Mobility opportunities should be developed, increased, and facilitated. Additionally, IFMSA recognizes that international Student Mobility includes clinical traineeships or medical electives as well as exchanges.

Furthermore, IFMSA advocates that exchanges must be standardized, every exchange following a high-quality framework with proper supervision, recognition, and endorsement from institutions. IFMSA understands that all medical students should have equitable access to Student Mobility, stressing the need to take down barriers that hinder students from achieving such an opportunity. The ground base of Student Mobility must therefore involve all stakeholders, to promote best practices in a socially accountable and ethical manner.

Call to Action:

IFMSA calls for **Governments** to:

1. Support medical Students' Mobility by providing all types of logistical aid to medical facilities and institutions which host exchange programs.
2. Ease visa issues and procedures for foreign students taking part in a Student Mobility program.
3. Provide any type of financial assistance for Students' Mobility programs.
4. Give access to the public facilities, resources, and capacities for the mobility programs, hindering any obstacle that might be faced.
5. Provide recognition of National Exchange Programs from the Public Health sector.

IFMSA calls for **International Health Organizations and Medical Associations** to:

1. Advocate for the importance of Student Mobility to share and exchange culture, knowledge, and experience tends to prepare future healthcare workers to work in a global environment.
2. Develop platforms for dialogue and promote the sharing of resources with Medical Schools and institutions that guide them on Student Mobility and initiatives that promote it.
3. Encourage, establish and strengthen national, regional and global networks for Student Mobility as well as promote collaboration between universities and IFMSA's national and international bodies.
4. Facilitate and support Student Mobility by creating internship opportunities and other programs that focus on knowledge, professional skills and multicultural environment.
5. Endorse and accredit learning opportunities that mobilize students.



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6. Provide funding and investment opportunities to youth-led organizations working on Student Mobility and provide scholarships to support students whose engagement in these programs/opportunities is restricted by financial barriers.
7. Promote and support the participation of students in organizational events and Meetings/Assemblies.

IFMSA calls on **Medical Schools** to:

1. Create official partnerships with Organizations and institutions that organize Student Mobility programs such as IFMSA and its National Member Organizations.
2. Help capacitate students before, during and after an exchange in terms of Global Health, ethical and intercultural sensitivity.
3. Support the organization of exchange programs and educational activities by offering logistical support and human resources such as tutors.
4. Offer financial support in the form of grants to increase the accessibility of the mobilities.
5. Provide Documents (Invitation Letters and Support Letters for the Embassies) stating the acceptance of the incoming students in the Hospital/Faculty departments/laboratories to facilitate the visa application process.
6. Help in promoting IFMSA Exchanges as well as raising research awareness and opportunities.
7. Follow up on the impact of mobilities by offering the opportunity of presenting and publishing the outcomes of the exchange in an open-access setting.
8. Ensure full academic recognition to student mobility programs and facilitate all accreditation processes.

IFMSA calls on **its National Member Organizations (NMOs)** to:

1. Ensure structured and supervised exchanges following the IFMSA SCOPE and SCORE Regulations.
2. Rank motivation, medical and personal competencies when selecting outgoing students and distributing incoming students.
3. Organize an equitable and transparent selection and distribution of exchange students.
4. Promote Student Mobility and strive to make the application process accessible to all the medical and biomedical students in the NMO.
5. Build the capacity of Exchange Officers in terms of coordination and advocacy.
6. Encourage a fruitful collaboration between highly motivated and prepared tutors and incoming students and align the exchange program with the Medical Schools' curriculum.
7. Build the capacity of exchange students before (Pre-Departure Training), during, and after the exchange (Upon Arrival Training, soft skills, medical and research educational activities).
8. Assess the quality of the exchange by ensuring that the SCOPE Handbook, SCORE Logbook and Evaluation Form are filled in.
9. Continuously improve the program according to the feedback of the impact assessment on students' education.
10. Build the capacity of exchange students and team members in terms of Global Health, intercultural learning, personal development, vocational skills and research competencies to organize high- quality, socially accountable and inclusive exchanges.
11. Advocate for exchanges and create sustainable collaborations with the Medical Schools and other stakeholders, taking advantage of the Memorandum of Understanding.

IFMSA calls for **Medical Students** to:

1. Participate in Exchange Programs, thus improving their academic course and formation.
2. Advocate for Student Mobility opportunities in their respective institutions.
3. Set an example during their Student Mobility Programs and share their experiences with their peers and colleagues.
4. Take part in the organization and logistics of Student Mobility opportunities and help improve the cultural aspect of exchanges.



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Position Paper

Background information:

International Student Mobility tends to change the global Medical Education landscape, with students going abroad not only for tertiary studies but also for broad integration of international and intercultural perspectives. It also prepares future medical graduates with the necessary competencies to work in a global environment [1]. It emphasizes the importance of globalization in health, cultural competency in practice and internationalization of the curriculum in Medical Education as well as highlighting the national and regional contexts governing these factors [2].

The lack of conclusive statistical data makes the International Mobility of medical students difficult to analyze from a comparative perspective and substantially reflects the subjectivity in the understanding of Student Mobility by different nations. Nonetheless, the review of the literature indicates the existence of different barriers in the introduction of a coherent and comprehensive internationalized approach in the discipline of medicine [1,2] including, but not limited to, regimentation in medical degree programs, strict and decentralized timetables of institutions and variance in recognition of credits [1].

International Student Mobility takes various forms such as an exchange, clinical clerkships, medical electives, etc. It enhances the discipline-specific and interdisciplinary skills of the student [3], and also positively influences their personal development, career choice and employment decisions in the long run [4].

Discussion:

Factors that affect the choice of medical students to mobilize

Since academic Mobility provides significant benefits for students, it is of the utmost importance to comprehend what factors positively or negatively influence the students' choices to go abroad. For starters, stimulating factors may include the desire to experience other cultures and previous positive experiences, as well as the willingness to experience different educational and healthcare settings [5].

Taking these factors into consideration, the possibility of encountering different health conditions and developing clinical skills and practical experience can be alluring [6]. Moreover, exposure to healthcare management and Health System challenges in distinct geographical settings play an important role in raising awareness of Global Health [6].

Besides, students' decisions concerning exchange and degree mobility are influenced by their social networks, especially recommendations from peers, relatives, and faculty members [7]. Another motivating factor that pushes students towards a mobility program is career planning and choice of a certain speciality [6]. Furthermore, a key point that affects students' choice to travel is the availability of exchange programs' information at an organizational level [5]. As the younger students become aware of the existing opportunities to study abroad, they also become more confident and informed, leading to a higher probability of enrolling and participating in a Student Mobility Program. [8].

Nevertheless, among the factors which prevent students from travelling abroad, expenses and the availability of bursaries are the most relevant and are the ones that need to be addressed. Also, limited or no faculty involvement with exchange programs hinders students' options to travel [5,9]. Also, a lack of similarity with the individual's native language can be a compromising factor [5]. Thus, linguistic and cultural security, social ties, and responsibilities can prevent students from mobilizing [6].

Structured Medical Mobilities

International medical electives are a well-established part of the curricula of most Medical Schools in high-income countries such as the UK, Australia, and Canada. Many schools allow, or in



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some cases, encourage their students to avail these opportunities and experiences, and discover new cultures, health systems and disease burden [10].

Fully-structured and supervised programs in which students receive significant support from their Medical Schools in the form of pre-departure training, financial assistance and recognition of their mobility could be a good way to reduce the burden of exchanges in the host countries and In addition to that, it can help in providing students with a program to learn more about Global Health in a more structured manner.

IFMSA Professional and Research Exchanges have their structure and supervision well-developed based on both benefits of students and medical institutions and the long-term engagement between National Member Organizations.

IFMSA Professional Exchanges include a 4-week or 8-week clerkship in a clinical or a pre-clinical department at a Medical School or Hospital in 106 National Member Organizations worldwide, providing clinical, cultural and Global Health experiences for medical students through rotations in several medical departments, educational activities, Global Health education and cultural programs.

IFMSA Research Exchanges include 4-week or 8-week clerkship in clinical or pre-clinical departments at a Medical School or hospital in 82 National Member Organizations worldwide, providing 4 types of research projects: Basic Science research project (lab work, literature study), Clinical research project with lab work (studying a highly specific clinical topic combined with basic research lab), Clinical research projects without lab work (investigating a highly specific clinical topic in a data collecting, clinical setting) and Global Action Project (combined theoretical teaching, research and fieldwork on endemic diseases).

Close attention is paid to the foundation of an academic qualitative and socially accountable exchange program organized as a collaboration between highly prepared Local Exchange Officers and motivated tutors to mentor the incoming students.

To maximize the level of engagement and outcomes of the mobilities, the outgoing students' selection and incoming students' distribution criteria should focus on ranking their medical and personal competencies and motivation in order of value for the specific type of exchange [11] [12].

Pre-Departure and Upon Arrival Training activities related to health, safety, ethical, and cultural challenges and are meant to prepare the students on a personal and cultural level. Likewise, on a professional level, specific workshops can be included in the process to ensure the achievement of skills and knowledge necessary to fully benefit from their exchange.

One of the core values of IFMSA Exchanges is enriching the medical and research education by offering extra opportunities in the form of training, workshops, seminars or masterclasses. To include the exchange student within the reality they have been inserted in during their mobility, several resources are made available like Global Health Training, Research Educational Activities on Basic Concepts in Medical Research, Critical Appraisal and Open Science.

Moreover, to keep track of students' clinical, laboratory, or fieldwork, together with the learning objectives, Global Health outcomes and skills, students and tutors are required to fill the SCORE Logbook [13] or SCOPE Handbook [14]. These mid-exchange and final evaluation tools ensure the quality assessment process of the students' performances throughout the exchange, based on the project or department's requirements and students expectations. Each one of them represents the proof of students' learning experience according to the type of project or department in which the student participation is endorsed by relevant Medical associations such as WFME, IPA, WFSA, etc.

Assessing the academic quality of exchanges represents the key factor for the continuous development and improvement of the program. Therefore, an additional Evaluation Form is required to



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be filled to weigh the impact of these mobilities on students' medical education alongside the evaluation of the Local Exchange coordination team and tutors' involvement and preparedness.

Also, ensuring a scientific outcome is the turning point of making the exchange as academically oriented as possible and expanding the quality of the clerkship. Several types of publications (SCORE Scientific Report, SCORE Abstract Template, SCORE Scientific Poster Template, SCORE Exchange Report) are used to encourage the students to reflect on their acquired knowledge and experience as well as increasing their comprehension and skills regarding scientific writing [15].

In terms of equity, ethics and effort to maintain two-way learning, fully structured exchanges, with great peer support, monitoring, pre-departure and upon-arrival training and proper follow-up give rise to the highest quality of elective experiences that are more sustainable for all. This endeavour requires significant engagement from Local Committees and Medical Schools around the world.

Post elective competencies improvement

As time progresses, the borders between countries are becoming less and less linear. Nowadays, with the increasing trade and global migration, the exchange of knowledge and cultural experiences between inhabitants of the most diverse locations and realities are favoured and the world has become progressively more interconnected. Along with enhanced cross-cultural contact, globalization has also had a dramatic impact on the determinants of health and distribution of diseases. Health problems are becoming increasingly transnational and the concept of Global Health has emerged to address these issues. These changes to the world's health and healthcare delivery have created a growing need for Global Health competency in future physicians. One of the many ways to achieve this relies on Student Mobility programs [16].

International Medical Mobilities allow medical students to be exposed to different healthcare and research environments, engage with new health systems and ultimately help them to understand how other systems operate and to think more critically about their organization, its function and processes [17]. Besides, these students report a broader awareness of Social Determinants of Health and a better comprehension of the importance of socioeconomic status, culture and health environment. [16] Finally, these projects also contribute to increase medical students' knowledge of disease and immigrant health and improve their clinical skills [18].

Student Mobility programs also have an important role in preparing medical students for the challenges they will face as physicians in a multicultural society. It not only makes them better able to address specific cultural aspects of health but also more prepared to approach other obstacles in healthcare provision, including language barriers and providing culturally inclusive treatment options [16]. Students that participate in such programs are generally more likely to report attitude changes, such as a greater appreciation for cross-cultural communication and cultural sensitivity and competency [18].

International electives provide significant benefits to medical students, both personally and professionally, and by providing a valuable learning opportunity for students to achieve core medical competencies and personal strength, these electives contribute to training more globally-minded and prepared future physicians to treat an increasingly interconnected world [16].

Educational Objectives of Students Mobility

Student Mobility, like all activities wherein one desires tangible impact, should be performed within the confines of preset targets. The European Union, in a collaborative effort with the Council of Europe, has defined a set of aims upon which Student Mobility programs should be constructed. These include intercultural competence which enables participants to interact constructively with people with other languages, values and cultural frameworks; personal development by strengthening competencies like self-reliance, problem-solving, adaptability, flexibility, etc., and vocational skills by obtaining knowledge and skills that can be used in a specific work context. [19]



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Narrowing down the scope to the realm of Medical Education, it can be seen that the most common objectives that international medical electives focus on are: pre-program cultural awareness; enhancing clinical skills; understanding different healthcare systems; learning to manage diseases seldom seen at the student's point of origin; increasing pre-existing cultural awareness, and having written a project wherein the student reflects on the experience obtained post-program [20]

The IFMSA and its constituent NMOs largely concur with these objectives. The most important addition our organization can make to the aforementioned is in the field of Global Health, wherein the IFMSA has defined 5 specific learning objectives for its intrinsic Student Mobility initiative, colloquially called "The Exchanges" around the world: to know the primary health concerns and basic epidemiology of the host country and how it differs from the home country; to understand the structure of the healthcare system in the host country and how it is funded; to have knowledge of the Medical Education System in the host country; to observe professional and doctor-patient relationships in the host country and compare them to the home country, and identify any differences in Public Health regionally and nationally in the host country. [21]

Recognition of Students Mobility

Healthcare systems need more students to participate in a mobility experience and benefit from free movement and traineeship in sensitive and diverse environments. Student Mobility, as part of cross-border education, has significant implications for the process of integrating international, intercultural, and global dimensions into the goals of delivering higher education. Having their internships abroad fully recognized is crucial, and therefore IFMSA targets to enable students to get recognition of their mobility period. Through a quality framework (tutors recruitment, selection and distribution of the exchange students, pre-departure and upon arrival training, educational activities, scientific outcomes, quality and impact assessments) and endorsement from International Agencies (WFME, IPA, WFSA, etc.), IFMSA aims to increase the current recognition statistics.

A relevant factor to consider is the recognition rate in other Mobility Programs, such as Erasmus+, which measured a recognition rate of 85% recognition in 2015 [22]. IFMSA Research and Professional Exchanges, when compared to Erasmus+ Mobility seem to fare better, SCORE Exchanges being a fully recognized elective exchange program granted with academic credentials in Medical Schools from 28 National Member Organizations and partially recognized in 25 National Member Organizations, while SCOPE Exchanges are fully recognized elective exchanges and granted with academic credentials in Medical Schools from 43 National Member Organizations and partially recognized in 53 National Member Organizations.

Visa Issues in medical Students Mobility

Visa issues are considered as one of the biggest hurdles that students or even visitors face during their preparations to travel [1]. This can be caused by various reasons, including but not limited to, the financial and logistical burdens the travellers may face during the application process to get their visa. [23] There are many reasons why embassies deny authorizing a visa to an individual. These include past or current criminal actions, false travel document, an insufficient explanation for the purpose and circumstances of the planned stay, damaged passport, passport invalidity, lack of proof of the travel itinerary, invalid letter of reference, insufficient means of subsistence, unacceptable birth or marriage certificate, invalid travel insurance, inability to provide a proof of accommodation, and unfavourable Schengen visa situation [24].

It is estimated that bilateral travel is reduced by 52 - 63% on average, due to visa restrictions mentioned above which shows a significant effect on the global movements of students and travellers that might impede cultural, economic, and scientific globalization [23].

More efforts should be made to facilitate Medical Students Mobilities since it has proved its effectiveness in promoting medical competencies and Global Health education among health-care



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workers between low income and high-income countries. As a result, we will be able to provide equal health services for people all over the world, regardless of their background [2], envisioning the 3rd goal of 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

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