

HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC IMPACTED EU AND OECD COUNTRIES IN THE MIGRATION AREA?

EMN FLASH #16 - 2021

Introduction to the EMN OECD Umbrella Inform on the impact of COVID-19 in the migration area

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching effects on all areas related to asylum and migration throughout 2020. The impact was felt particularly in terms of border closures, travel restrictions and the need to introduce sanitary measures to try to bring the virus under control.

How did EU and OECD countries mitigate the effects of the pandemic on different categories of third-country nationals and what was the implication for their admission to the territory? How were asylum and migration processes adapted during the pandemic,

and what measures were implemented to fulfil labour market needs admits travel restrictions?

This Flash summarises the key findings of the Umbrella Inform jointly produced by the EMN and OECD, with inputs provided by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX). At a glance, the main research findings are introduced below.

Key findings

- The pandemic impacted on entry conditions and the issuance of **residence permits** by EU Member States both at missions abroad and on the territory. On the territory, Member States and Norway began to introduce restrictions on in-person immigration-related services. To ensure continuity, even during office closures, services were maintained using post, electronic means or using online systems. In some Member States, pre-existing online systems continued to be used. Electronic tools and online systems were also commonly used in non-EU OECD countries.
- To ensure that migrants already on the territory of EU or non-EU OECD countries **did not fall into irregular situations** due to travel restrictions or restrictions on immigration services, automatic extensions of residence permits, tolerated stays, and/or the suspension/extension of procedural deadlines were introduced throughout 2020. Mainstream support available to the unemployed and employers were also applicable to migrants in many EU and OECD countries, in addition to COVID-19 related healthcare.
- To **meet labour market needs**, continued admission to the territory was ensured for essential occupational sectors, notably health, agriculture and transport, both in EU and non-EU OECD countries.
- In the area of **international protection**, new tools and processes used in asylum and reception systems in the immediate response to the pandemic no longer represent just a short-term solution for EU+ countries to mitigate COVID-19, but the emerging 'new normal'. The operationalisation of emergency shelters or isolation areas in reception centres was crucial to ensure physical distancing and adequate sanitary conditions. New challenges emerged in guaranteeing an effective and fair asylum procedure for both first instance applications and appeals, e.g. the quality of remote interviews and access to and skills needed to use electronic tools by applicants.
- As **international students** were generally subject to the same travel restrictions as other third-country nationals, migration authorities in EU Member States used online procedures for issuance of visa or residence permits. Some EU Member States reported substantial decreases in the number of new international students by the end of 2020 compared to previous years. Physical presence on campuses was discouraged in many EU and non-EU OECD countries and those international students who were admitted to the territory prior to the pandemic but subsequently returned home, were often allowed to continue their studies online from abroad.
- Travel restrictions impacted on both the number of **return decisions and on the implementation of return** in EU Member States and in non-EU OECD countries. Forced return was heavily impacted and had not reached pre-pandemic levels by December 2020, also due to the difficulty of organising return flights to third countries. Return counselling and other pre-departure services were often moved to online communication formats and online pre-registration activities were developed to allow individuals to access Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) procedures.

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