



Erasmus+

1st year review

Student mobility



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INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE
ERASMUS STUDENT NETWORK

1. Introduction

The Erasmus programme is one of the EU's most iconic initiatives, and its latest incarnation is the most significant leap forward in more than a quarter of a century. Erasmus+ encompasses a range of new ideas that have the potential to drive European student mobility forward in terms of both quality and quantity, while embracing the use of digital solutions – just as its main beneficiaries are becoming the first truly connected generation.

The European University Foundation (EUF) and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) are wholly committed to making Erasmus+ a success, because student mobility is Europe's best tool to bring future generations closer together. Enabling students to live abroad for several months, to forge friendships with peers from across the continent and to become acquainted with societies and traditions other than their own gives them an opportunity to benefit from an experience that should foster tolerance and have a direct positive impact on society at large.

Given that Erasmus embodies the spirit of Europe in a way few other political initiatives can aspire to, we consider it crucial to make every effort towards increasing its reach and impact. As a result, EUF and ESN have prepared this joint review, which focuses on the administration and funding of learning mobility for higher education students (Key Action 1) during the 2014/2015 academic year. We aim to support the European Commission, the European Parliament and all relevant stakeholders in the preparations for the mid-term review of Erasmus+ through an open and constructive discussion about how the full potential of the programme can best be achieved.

2. Recommendations

1. Develop and test the impact of more efficient grant calculation mechanisms.
2. Decrease the social selectivity of Erasmus participation by allowing mobile students to combine studying abroad with a study-related work placement.
3. Enforce the quality standards laid out in the Erasmus Charter through the Mobility Tool, notably with regards to the full recognition of ECTS.
4. Ensure that online language courses are available in all EU languages well before 2020.
5. Release resources to improve the online learning experience by moving away from the licensing fee approach currently in place with the OLS.
6. Ensure that sufficient resources are set aside for the development and testing of tools to lighten the administrative burden of managing student mobility.
7. Share the responsibility of prototyping and testing new features and/or policies with International Mobility Consortia to ensure a smooth roll-out of new features in the future.
8. Simplify the administration of mobility to and from partner countries.
9. Ensure that a student viewpoint is part of how the Erasmus programme is implemented by including students in consultative bodies of National Agencies.

3. Analysis of Erasmus+ components

3.1 Learning mobility funding

The substantial increase in the programme budget and the fact that two million higher education students are due to benefit from EU financial support mean that the stakes are very high to make the most of the resources available. Historically, lack of funding has been the biggest deterrent to greater participation in the Erasmus programme. While the current financial envelope should allow for a substantial increase in the number of students involved, the mechanisms in place are not yet able to cope effectively with the diversity of students' economic and social backgrounds as well as differences in national financial realities.

3.1.1 Improving the Erasmus grant system

The rationale behind Erasmus grants is that they should help cover the difference in living costs that students incur when studying abroad. The programme guidelines group destination countries into three categories according to their respective living costs, and the grant the student receives is matched to the country of destination – a simple mechanism that HEIs can easily manage.

However, the mechanism's simplicity is an obstacle to its resolution and economic efficiency. For example, in countries such as Germany, Spain and France the difference in costs of living among the various cities and regions is wholly ignored by the calculation. Such variations can be quite significant: e.g. the cost of living in Frankfurt and Hamburg is approximately 30% higher than Leipzig or Greifswald.

EU resources could be harnessed in a more efficient way if grants were calculated using one of the following two sources of information:

- Cost of living estimations produced by all HEIs that comply with ECTS guidelines.
- NUTS 2 living cost statistics, which provide regional information across all of Europe.

If grants were better tailored to students' specific situations, this would amount to a significant gain in efficiency and would increase the number of potentially mobile students.

A pilot test should be set up to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of a more sophisticated grant calculation mechanism.

3.1.2 Social Top-up Grants

Research carried out by Eurostudent has repeatedly pointed to the fact that participation in the Erasmus programme is socially selective (to a greater extent than general participation in higher education), so assertive strategies need to be put in place to address such bias, as per the political commitment made by all the Ministries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The Erasmus+ programme features a mechanism that allows students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to benefit from a 100-200 EUR top-up on their monthly grant. Unfortunately the implementation of the socioeconomic top-up grant is not yet clearly outlined as there are different schemes in place on a national level and the top-up scheme is optional for countries. In at least one of the countries surveyed in EUF's annual Erasmus+ Review, this mechanism was not deployed in 2014/15 as guidelines for the scheme were deemed unclear.

3.1.3 Working students

A large number of students also remain structurally excluded from embarking on a mobility experience due to the fact that they rely on income earned through labour to cover their living costs. According to the Eurostudent report, more than 50% of the European student population combines studying and working. Existing grant arrangements are not usually enough to compensate for the loss of income some of these students would incur, which means a different approach is necessary.

One possible solution for enabling working students to go abroad might be to allow them to take a work placement abroad while studying. Current rules allow students to do one or the other, but not both simultaneously. Removing this limitation would enable them to earn additional income and create synergies between the academic and vocational realms.

#europehome

From 2010 to 2014, EUF pioneered the use of study-related placements to help enhance students' employability and expand their professional network abroad, which in turn improves European labour mobility. Mobile students met these opportunities with enthusiasm: 76% of the respondents to the 2014 ESNSurvey said they would be willing to combine studying and working abroad.

www.europehome-project.eu

3.1.4 Disabled students

Another challenge that remains to be addressed is the perennially low number of students with disabilities that take part in student mobility, compared to the number of students with disabilities in higher education generally. The Erasmus+ programme provides a top-up grant for cases where students need special support because of their disabilities. Unfortunately, lack of HEI accessibility and insufficient cooperation between disability and international relations offices leads to students not receiving the right information or feeling discouraged about taking the step of going abroad.

ExchangeAbility

ESN established the ExchangeAbility project, to support students by opening up local activities and providing them with information at the 500 institutions where ESN is prominent. By mapping HEIs, ESN is now trying to create a more transparent overview of accessibility that students with disabilities can use before deciding to go abroad.

www.exchangeability.esn.org

3.1.5 Partner country grants

Another important new feature that was introduced concerns grants for mobility with partner countries. While this new feature is highly valued it should be noted that grant amounts are somewhat distorted when considering local living costs – students heading to Albania, Moldova and Tunisia (among others) will receive a grant of 650 EUR/month. This might also explain why in most HEIs surveyed the number of grants to partner countries was considerably lower than student demand. Meanwhile, the calculation of travel costs does not necessarily reflect market prices and trip durations often overestimate the availability of connections to several regions.

3.1.6 Master loan guarantee scheme

The master loan guarantee scheme is another new arrival in the current incarnation of the Erasmus programme but, unlike the social top-up grants previously discussed, we have considerable reserves about the fitness for purpose of such a tool.

In addition to deep-seated concerns regarding the increasing amounts of debt students are saddled with, the design of the scheme strikes us as flawed. It is worth remembering that when discussions about such a scheme were launched, there was a clear preference among stakeholders towards an income-contingent loan

structure, which would have offered substantially more attractive repayment conditions to students. Avoiding that configuration seems to have rendered the scheme less student-centred, and it remains to be seen how this will negatively impact its implementation. Due to the slow rollout of the scheme there will be a lack of available data for objective analysis of its impact in time for the Erasmus+ programme's mid-term review.

3.2 Support tools for quality mobility

3.2.1 Academic recognition

Ensuring full recognition of the credits earned while studying abroad has been a longstanding challenge for everyone involved in the Erasmus programme. Despite slow but steady progress on this most crucial of quality indicators, the STORY research carried out by ESN shows that more than one in five students still faces such problems. This is simply unacceptable.

We are optimistic that the introduction of the Mobility Tool will contribute significantly to the removal of all recognition problems. EUF has perfected the use of centralised quality assurance strategies over the last decade, allowing for the near eradication of recognition issues among its participating universities. However, such results can only be replicated in Erasmus if the information gathered centrally is acted upon assertively, and one year after the introduction of the tool the European Commission is still to clarify the extent to which it intends to enforce the rules laid out in the Erasmus Charter.

In the era of Big Data, the Mobility Tool also constitutes an invaluable resource for researchers interested in looking into the quality of student mobility, and we urge the European Commission to ensure they will be able to have access to it under clear and transparent rules. Technical solutions should also be considered to allow the exchange of information with national authority and HEIs databases. Conversely, it would be important to ensure that the information contained in the Mobility Tool will not be sold or shared for profit generating purposes.

3.2.2 Internships/Traineeships

Erasmus+ traineeships represent about 20% of higher education individual mobility and their popularity is still increasing. In 2012 the European Youth Forum developed a European Quality Charter for Internships and Apprenticeship, a framework to address the lack of quality opportunities provided (www.qualityinternships.eu).

Despite this creation, the 2014 STORY research shows that there is still a lack of sufficient support in terms of funding and backing from the students' institutions of origin – only 37% of HEIs help students find a host organisation. This could be attributed to the lack of incentive for HEIs to collaborate with companies and organisations abroad. As

such, traineeships should be closely monitored to ensure the quality of the learning experience and the quality of the support received by beneficiaries.

From a broader perspective, the European Commission needs to start exploring possible mechanisms to ensure that minimum quality standards are respected within host organisations for Erasmus+ traineeship students.

Erasmus internships

ESN contributes by connecting Erasmus+ students with host organisations through its www.erasmusintern.org platform. Over 12,000 students took advantage of the platform in the first year after its release.

www.erasmusintern.org

3.2.3 Language learning

Supporting the learning of the local language is of paramount importance to ensure exchange students are able to connect with their host society. Erasmus students themselves value the experience of learning a new language – 83% of the 2014 ESNSurvey respondents who went abroad to English, French, Italian, Spanish or German speaking countries said they were keen to follow language courses, but only 33% attended a language course in one of these languages. Similarly, 74% of the students who went abroad to countries where the other European languages are spoken said they were keen to follow language courses, but only 19% attended a language course.

Bearing these numbers in mind, Erasmus+ introduced two important changes regarding support for language learning: on one hand it cut off support for the intensive language courses that used to take place before the academic year/semester; on the other hand, it established a platform dedicated to “Online Linguistic Support” (OLS), which is more scalable than traditional language courses. Unfortunately at its launch the OLS offered only six languages, and institutions raised concerns about the slow distribution of licenses and lack of information on the operational side. The guarantees made by the European Commission that all EU official languages will eventually be added by 2020 is an important commitment, but it would be ideal if a detailed timetable for the expansion of the system were published shortly, with a view to ensuring equal opportunities among countries and HEIs.

It would be worth considering the limits to the sustainability of the current OLS design, since the bulk of its expenses is directed towards software licenses that need to be renewed on a yearly basis. Over the years, universities and public language centres have developed high quality courses and modules, often in the context of EU-funded projects. This material could be made available at a minimal cost through a partnership with the European Commission, eliminating the need to pay private providers to design

new language courses. This would release up to 10 million euros per year that could be directed towards providing support to learners, e.g. by substantially increasing the number of tutors that support the acquisition of language skills.

Speak Up!

EUF's online language-learning platform is available for free to all European students and provides courses in 7 European languages before, during and after the period spent abroad. The platform is also being made available to volunteers who organise language courses for refugees.

www.speakup-europe.eu

3.2.4 Local integration

The term “Erasmus bubble” has been coined to refer to the phenomenon of exchange students with limited socialisation experiences beyond the circle of local foreign students, and the mere existence of such a concept proves that further efforts are necessary to enhance students’ integration in their host society. Institutions need to be encouraged to provide elaborate support systems, ideally with a peer-to-peer approach, involving local student organisations.

Additionally, the Erasmus+ experience should not be limited to a formal educational experience. The benefits of living abroad are enhanced if students are given the opportunity to fully engage in the life of their host community. This engagement provides a platform for experiential learning where transversal skills can be nurtured and developed. We recommend that the Erasmus+ programme take this reality into account by encouraging the implementation of a “social ECTS” system, which would reward students for voluntary involvement with NGOs or student associations.

We also recommend that the Erasmus+ programme clearly recognise the role taken on by civil society players such as student associations to help Erasmus+ students integrate into their host environment. This support should allow funding to student associations as part of the support budget.

SocialErasmus

ESN has contributed substantially through its work at an institutional level, particularly through the SocialErasmus project, which helps to integrate students into the local community by becoming involved in volunteer activities that benefit society.

www.socialerasmus.esn.org

3.3 Administration

The majority of the changes introduced in the administration of the Erasmus+ programme aim to simplify its administration. Enabling the usage of digital signatures to validate Learning Agreements and the ability to replace dozens of bilateral agreements with inter-institutional agreements are bold steps that deserve to be singled out for praise. However most HEIs surveyed found that these changes have not yet translated into significant efficiency gains; in particular staff members have noted that the repeated revision of the Learning Agreement template has caused confusion among and within HEIs while several International Offices remark that the Mobility Tool amounts to a duplication of work. However there is untapped potential to enhance existing solutions, notably by making use of technology that can help improve and streamline administrative work.

Online learning agreement

The Learning Agreement Online System (LAOS), a joint initiative by EUF and ESN, allows mobile students to prepare, submit and sign their learning agreements online, substantially easing the work of both students' and HEIs.

www.learning-agreement.eu

3.4 European and International Dimension of Erasmus+

3.4.1 International dimension

One area where improvements should be considered is the organisation of exchanges with partner countries. This being a new (and rather important) feature of the Erasmus+ programme, it is understandable that the initial steps in implementing it are somewhat complex.

Several of the HEIs surveyed found that the current application process is too complicated and time-consuming – improving it would help ensure that this new mobility opportunity will grow sustainably throughout the length of the programme.

3.4.2 European mobility consortia

Another feature that could contribute to truly European higher education would be the establishment of Europe-wide Mobility Consortia. Currently such consortia only exist on the national level, which is counter-intuitive. European Mobility Consortia

of HEIs could be tasked with carrying out long-term policy experiments aimed at continuously improving the impact of Erasmus (e.g. by piloting innovative strategies to decrease the social selectivity of participants or to solve recognition problems). This would also allow new features to be thoroughly tested prior to their wider release, ensuring a smoother transition between different generations of the Erasmus programme.

Campus Europae

Many of the new features introduced with Erasmus+ were pioneered by EUF's Campus Europae mobility scheme, ranging from the possibility of studying abroad multiple times, to the full involvement of HEIs from partner countries in centralised quality assurance strategies and the provision of online language courses prior to studying abroad.

www.campuseuropae.org

3.5 Good governance

The Erasmus+ programme involves a wide variety of stakeholders, complex processes and financial rules. All organisations and bodies in charge of its implementation should follow basic good-governance principles. A high level of democracy, transparency and accountability should be respected by the European Commission, the Executive Agency, National Agencies and HEIs in order to ensure the most cost-effective processes and to best serve the interest of the final beneficiaries, namely students, all across Europe. Within National Agencies, the inclusion of stakeholder principles should also be enforced, allowing students to voice their concerns and suggestions on how the programme is implemented.

We recommend that clear, good-governance guidelines be provided for National Agencies and HEIs regarding the implementation process of Erasmus+.

4. About the authors



The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is Europe's biggest network of student organisations, bringing together 500 associations that work with students on an institutional level. The support they provide for incoming and outgoing students is of substantial value for the success of the programme and high quality mobility experiences. Through a range of Europe-wide research projects (PRIME Survey, ESNSurvey, STORY) ESN has contributed to the development of the programme and as a result created multiple large-scale initiatives to tackle some of the programme's weaknesses. (ErasmusIntern.org, ExchangeAbility, SocialErasmus and so on).

www.esn.org



The European University Foundation (EUF) aims to accelerate the modernisation of the European Higher Education Area in the fields of quality mobility, graduate employability, digital higher education, policy innovation and active citizenship. Its flagship project is the Campus Europae mobility scheme, which started in 2004 and has grown into Europe's most important think/do tank for setting new standards of quality in student exchange.

www.uni-foundation.eu

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