Implementing EWP: Universidad de Almeria

"EWP works, but to feel the benefits, all institutions need to get on board"

Location: Almeria, Spain

Students: (2022)

EWP Stats (02/2023)

IIAs approved: 34%

LAs (out) approved: 29%

LAs (in) approved: 45%

System: UMove (in-house system)

The EWP project, part of the European Student Card Initiative, is a prime example of European cooperation. A multi-stakeholder collaboration aiming to simplify the administrative procedures and reduce the burden on Higher Education Institutions, and students by digitally exchanging information, boosting student and staff mobility for all.

Institutions participating in the Erasmus Programme play a crucial role in the process of connecting to the Erasmus Without Paper network, either via the EWP Dashboard, their in-house system or via a third party system.

During the years to come, the EWP+ consortium aims to provide further support for HEIs implementing the digitalisation roadmap. But we also want to highlight the accomplishments and success stories from HEIs that are already able to enjoy the benefits of the European Student Card Initiative.

Today, we are visiting the Universidad de Almería, which is connected to the EWP network for both inter-institutional agreements and online learning agreements via UMove. Their system is developed by Almeria itself, and is also used by five other Spanish Universities (see below). We are meeting with Hugo Gonzalez Martinez, who is Director for internationalisation at the Almeria IRO.

State of play

Is your institution approving IIAs via Erasmus?

Hugo: We already started approving IIAs in 2021, the first was approved on October 5th 2021. Neither IIAs or LAs went very smoothly from the beginning. Sometimes it works perfectly, other times we need to send twenty emails and a pdf would have been much easier. But we count every approved agreement as a small victory.

Is your institution approving LAs via Erasmus?

Hugo: We started signing Online Learning Agreements (OLAs) in 2022. We also experienced some problems with the implementation. There is a lot of technical documentation, but often not a proper explanation on the 'how'. Some things are not mandatory to implemented, but they are required to be able to

properly exchange OLAs. That can be quite frustrating and time consuming to find a workaround.

However, we fully agree that once every institution connects to the EWP network, the administrative process will be a lot faster. It will relieve the workload for the international office so much that getting there is really important for all of us.

How has the interaction been with your provider/EWP support staff?

Hugo: We developed our own in-house system, called UMove. We started digitising our mobility process back in 2015. By the time EWP was announced, we already had a system that was handling a lot of other functionalities, such as communication, payments, generating certifications etc.

Currently, five other universities are using our system, the universities of Alicante, Huelva, Jaen, Cadiz and Universidad Politecnica de Cartagena. Some were using it already before EWP, others joined because of EWP.

How well informed do you feel the staff of your institution is about EWP?

Hugo: The mobility process is centralised at Almeria. We decide on the number of agreements and mobilities. Off course we check with the faculties to make sure that the courses are academically compatible for our students. Generally, there is no need to inform staff about EWP, except in specific circumstances (like when we have to explain the reason behind any delays).

Success factors and experiences

What was the biggest challenge for establishing your EWP connection? How did you overcome it?

Hugo: The biggest challenge was a lack of clarity and support for the implementation, at least for connecting an in-house system. For example, when we gained access to the test environment set-up by the University of Warsaw, everything was in Polish. So our IT staff had to copy pasted from Google translate to see if they were clicking the correct buttons. There was a lot of technical documentation, but that did not clarify how the processes for IIAs were going to work. So, it was a

difficult journey to say the least. How did we overcome it? A lot of hard work from our IT-colleagues and looking for partners to exchange knowledge.

What were some of the success factors that supported the implementation at your HEI?
Hugo: What really helped was that the colleagues from the IT-department are in the next building, and not a phone number or email address from a help desk. Even now, me and my IRO colleagues connect with our IT colleagues on a daily basis. I can suggest small improvements that do not come with a price tag. There is also more mutual trust. I would encourage all universities that have the resources, invest in your own in-house system. Erasmus mobilities are just one of the administrative processes that could make our lives much easier when they are properly digitised.

Do you have tips for your colleagues on how they can better benefit from EWP?
Hugo: I think that committing to the process is really important. That requires resources, but there are ways of getting resources and of getting support. We reached out to the universities Salamanca and País Vasco to test our connection bilaterally. You could also use Erasmus+ grants to visit IT teams of different universities to better understand the implementation process.

Vision on digitisation

Why do you think it is important to connect to the EWP-Network for the university?
Hugo: Every step forward in the digitisation process can save IRO staff hours of work. It requires an investment of time and money, but it is worth it. Sometimes I talk to other IROs, and it amazes and frustrates me to hear they are not moving forward. Universities say EWP does not work, they are wrong. EWP works and in order to benefit from it, all higher educations should move sooner rather than later.

What new priorities do you feel EWP should tackle in the future?
Hugo: I would say, include more voices from the IROs in the decision-making process. Sometimes, certain process or design choices do not make sense from an IRO standpoint. If we are

"Every step forward in the digitisation process can save IRO staff hours of work. But you have to put in the time and resources"

designing things to make the life of IRO staff easier, picking their brain for ideas or feedback is crucial.

The other major barrier to a fully functioning EWP, is the lack of a serious ultimatum. There are universities who are not implementing EWP because they do not feel the pressure or urgency to do it. I would say EWP needs a carrot or a stick, maybe even both. If a partner is not willing to sort out issues and implement EWP, we as a university cannot force them. If we want full interoperability for IIAs and LAs by the end of 2023, universities need to realise what will happen if they do not.

The use of the APIs is something that could be clarified. It is still not clear how an IIA will be modified, which could have a serious impact on our system. Another issue is that providers implement the same APIs in a different way. Stronger guidelines from above should mitigate the current situation of adapting our system depending on the provider that a partner is using.

What factors would make EWP impact even more positively on students?
Hugo: It would be a huge benefit for students if we could integrate course catalogues in the mobility process. Every year, there are thousands of students who have to cancel their Erasmus mobility. They really wanted to go to Paris, they apply and make arrangements, only to find out that they applied at a university that does not offer the correct courses.

Once a student is nominated, he/she should be directed to the course catalogue, and they can compare it with the curriculum of the sending institution. This is probably very ambitious, but it would protect students and enable them to make more informed decisions.

Aerial of the campus of the Universidad de Almeria. © UAL