



Position Paper

Coimbra Group's Recommendations for the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 Interim Evaluation

Executive Summary.....	1
Preamble.....	2
Overview of the Erasmus+ Programme	2
Eligibility and Mobility.....	3
Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs)	3
Short-term mobility	4
Traineeships.....	4
Administrative Aspects	6
Funding	6
Digitalization	7
Beneficiary Module	8
Final Remarks.....	9
References	11

Executive Summary

The EU's Erasmus+ programme plays a pivotal role in European Higher Education. The vast majority of the European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) rely on it as the primary financial support for international mobility and collaboration in education. The Erasmus programme has always been a key element and emblem of the most successful idea of "Europe" both within and outside the European Union.

As we approach the mid-term point of the 2021-2027 cycle, this position paper undertakes a thorough analysis of the accomplishments, obstacles, and prospects inherent in the Erasmus+ Programme in the area of Higher Education. The intention of the Coimbra Group is therefore to provide recommendations for further improving the Erasmus+ programme on behalf of the European higher education sector on the basis of joint work and thorough investigation among our members.

The paper first gives an overall analysis of the Erasmus+ programme and then focuses specifically on a number of specific concrete issues, identifying the relevant achievements and challenges, and giving recommendations for each area.

The document presents final remarks useful for the implementation of the future Programme and with the aim of offering a useful contribution to the best possible implementation of Erasmus+ higher education actions supported by internal policy funds (KA131), with regards topics with a specific focus on issues that concretely affect HEI members.

Preamble

The Coimbra Group (CG) is an association of 40 long-established European multidisciplinary universities of high international standard¹. It is one of the pioneering actors in the creation of Erasmus+ in the 80's and its members are still among the most active players of the programme.

This position paper represents the results of a collective effort chaired by the Academic Exchange and Mobility (AEM) Working Group (WG), with the input from the Employability WG, the CG Executive Board and the CG Office. Since the public consultation on the "Interim evaluation of Erasmus+ 2021-2027 and final evaluation of Erasmus+ 2014-2020" was launched on 15th of September 2023, the participants have followed an intense work schedule in preparing this

document to identify the key issues that are developed herein. The document presents the views of the CG member universities on the first years of Erasmus+ 2021-2027 and highlights issues of particular importance for its members.

Overview of the Erasmus+ Programme

The Erasmus+ programme is a fundamental pillar of the European Union. From its establishment, the Programme has aimed to foster enhanced collaboration among universities and higher education institutions across Europe.

In particular, the current phase of Erasmus+ (2021-2027) places a strong focus on four core elements: social inclusion, the green and digital transitions, and promoting young people's participation in democratic life. The Coimbra Group welcomed the European Commission's comprehensive vision on these horizontal priorities and the novelties introduced but intend to analyze hereafter some relevant topics regarding the Erasmus+ KA131 - Mobilities in Higher Education of particular importance for our members. In particular we focused our attention on two areas, on eligibility rules/mobility and on the administrative procedures. For each of these areas, a number of concrete issues have been critically analysed with practical recommendations offered.

¹ Coimbra Group members: <https://www.coimbra-group.eu/mission-statement/list-of-members>

Eligibility and Mobility

Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs)

The new funding scheme supporting Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs) under the Erasmus+ Programme allows the organization of international learning activities combining online collaboration and a short physical mobility, designed around a “challenge-based” approach. This novelty was positively appreciated by the CG Universities. However there are some issues to be reported.

The Universities reported that the BIP guidelines given at the national level (e.g. tolerance levels of how many participants a BIP should have or which participants count towards the 15 participants in a BIP in order to be eligible) differ from country to country. Different interpretation by different countries leads to overall confusion and makes the communication with partners and processing of the BIPs more tedious than it should and could be.

The individual support and, when applicable, travel support offered to participants for the physical activity of the BIP, is provided by the sending HEI (and the receiving HEI in the case of invited staff from enterprises and participants from third countries not associated with the programme funded with external action instruments). Furthermore, “to be eligible for organizational support, a blended intensive

programme needs to involve a minimum of 15 Erasmus+ mobile learners supported by internal policy funds (not including teaching/training staff involved in the delivery of the programme). These 15 participants must be undertaking their mobility specifically to attend the Blended Intensive Programme through either one of the following Erasmus+ mobility activities: blended short-term student mobility for studies or blended staff mobility for training.”²

Recommendations

- A **unified regulation** on European level adopted by all National Agencies and therefore to be implemented by all HEIs across participating countries would significantly improve the joint management of BIPs as well as the quality of the programmes.
- It is necessary to provide **specific funds** for individual support and travel support to participants.
- There should be **more flexibility concerning the eligible participants**. For example, it should be possible to report withdrawals towards the minimum number of selected participants. This would allow for individuals withdrawing for personal reasons before the start of the BIP and “allow up to one third of the

² “Erasmus+ Programme Guide”, European Commission, 2023, p. 62: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-04/ErasmusplusProgramme-Guide2023-v3_en.pdf

international incoming participants (5 out of the 15) to come from Bologna process countries and/or financed by Erasmus+ external policy funds (i.e KA 171)” as stated in the position paper issued by CIVIS, Europe’s Civic University Alliance.³

Short-term mobility

The new opportunity of mobility for studies and/or traineeships for doctoral candidates: from 5 to 30 days of physical mobility (a study mobility may include a complementary traineeship period, if planned), excluding travel time is a positive measure for a more inclusive programme. However, again there are some issues that we feel it is useful to point out.

Some National Agencies allow short term mobilities without any restrictions, whereas others strongly recommend short term mobilities only in those cases where long term mobility is not possible (due to health reasons, etc.). Furthermore, we have noted that mobility between 30 and 60 days is in no way contemplated.

³ “Position paper: CIVIS asks for a revision of the eligibility criteria of Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs)”, CIVIS, Europe’s Civic University Alliance, August 2023: <https://civis.eu/storage/files/civis-position-paper-review-on-eligibility-criteria-of-bip-august-2023.pdf>

Recommendations

- A **unified regulation** across national borders would improve the administration of new schemes.
- It would be advisable to have a more interconnected and synergetic **link with other European instruments such Horizon Europe on doctoral studies**.
- There is a need to **simplify administrative procedures** for short-term mobility: for example the IIAs shouldn't be mandatory for doctoral students that want to have a mobility period in a university abroad.
- It would be very useful to **account for mobilities between 30 and 60 days** in order to guarantee a better access to all possible mobility experiences.

Traineeships

The activity “student mobility for traineeships” that involves “a traineeship (work placement, internship) abroad in an enterprise, a research institute, a laboratory, an organization or any other relevant workplace” is a important aspect of the Programme from our point of view⁴. High quality traineeships have a clear added value for students acquiring relevant skills, improving their

⁴ “Erasmus+ Programme Guide”, European Commission, 2023, p. 48: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-04/ErasmusplusProgramme-Guide2023-v3_en.pdf

employability and ensuring easier access to the global labour market.

It can be challenging to find high-quality traineeships abroad. In many cases students don't know local employers or job portals in their preferred regions or countries. The Europass portal is still not used by a majority of employers, so it is challenging for students as well as for Higher Education Career Services to find useful job portals for their preferred regions.

Another challenge for Higher Education Career Services is finding the time for additional deeper research on different application modes and unwritten rules of the local labour markets before advising their students.

There are also important contextual differences in each country, and in national legislations or frameworks regarding traineeships, that offers a differing landscape across Europe.

Regarding traineeships abroad – funded by the Erasmus+ programme or other funding schemes – there are several barriers that students face when planning traineeships. One of the most challenging barriers is the financial aspect. Many students need to work part-time jobs to finance their studies. Although the Erasmus+ programme and many National Agencies raised the monthly funding rates and introduced several social top ups, doing a traineeship abroad is still financially challenging as students often need to leave their part-time job to do, what is in many cases across Europe, an unpaid traineeship. Students regularly indicate that the Erasmus+ funding is insufficient to meet their needs when undertaking a traineeship.

Recommendations

- **Modify the “Learning Agreement After the Mobility”**: After a traineeship, many employers do not invest a lot of time in completing this document. A more informative document that helps future employers and the trainees to get a qualitative overview over the tasks, the evaluation, and the learning outcomes of traineeships would be more helpful. This would also ensure that students get a high-quality overview over their traineeship. The form should not be too onerous on employers to complete. In general, it is important to ensure that hosting trainees does not become too burdensome for employers as overregulation and red tape may act as a disincentive to taking on trainees.
- **Emphasis on the inclusion aspects of traineeships (Erasmus+ SMT)**: Students need to get practical experience and skills training, so they are well-prepared to enter the labour market. Erasmus+ traineeships are a great way for students to discover other countries and cultures while gaining practical experience. As the labour market becomes more international, students need to collaborate more effectively with colleagues from all over the world and to be able to easily move between different work situations and countries. Traineeships abroad provide a great way

for students to get this practical training during their programme of study and this should be emphasized more.

- **Strengthen student reflection on learning from Erasmus+ experiences:** While students do acquire many competencies from their Erasmus+ experiences, they often do not reflect on their skills development afterwards and consider how it may inform their career development. This should be promoted more across HEIs in collaboration with Erasmus Offices and Careers Services. Best practice examples on this topic would be useful to share so we can learn from each other's experiences.
- It would be helpful to strengthen the **promotion of the Europass job portal** in combination with the Erasmus+ programme.
- It would be useful to create **common platforms with tips for applications for future Erasmus+ trainees** and make them accessible and known to Career Services across HEIs. There needs to be a clear distinction between the arrangements to be used for traineeships where the trainee is a student (agreement with the university) and where the trainee is a graduate (direct employment contract with the company).
- It would be useful to encourage individual states towards a **convergence of these national contexts** in order to stimulate international practices, as their operation would be more understandable for all

actors involved (HEIs, students and traineeship providers).

- It would be most helpful to provide **additional funds for "student mobility for traineeships"**.

Administrative Aspects

Funding

The CG members welcome the increase in budgets envisaged in the launch of the Erasmus 2021-27 programme. Indeed, the programme is endowed with a budget of €26.2 billion, a significant increase from the €14.7 billion allocated for the 2014-2020 period. We also welcome the introduction of novelties and additional top ups. However there have been challenges that need to be considered.

The primary issue is the allocation of funds. The inclusion of different top-ups has not been accompanied by an adequate expansion of the funds allocated to each individual university for the realization of its mobility. While the National Agencies normally calculate the funds based on the past performance of the institutions, it is difficult to estimate the allocation of inclusion top-up without increasing mobility numbers.

Similarly, what has been pointed out by the CG Universities is a lack of concrete guidelines that are straightforward for all the institutions to interpret and apply. Consider, for example, the case of the Top-up amount for students and recent graduates with fewer opportunities. This requires clarity on defining and implementing clear and equitable eligibility criteria and

collecting and verifying data to accurately identify individuals with fewer opportunities.

Furthermore, the Green travel top-up is proving to be insufficient to incentivise green travel choices.

Recommendations

- We seek the introduction of **common rules and guidelines** in particular for “Top-up amount for students and recent graduates with fewer opportunities”: it is necessary to have clear regulations and common classification of “fewer opportunities” for all EU Member States and Third Countries Associated to the Programme.
- The Green travel **top-up needs to be increased** (250 euro as proposed by the “Green Erasmus Project”⁵).
- **Specific funds for mobilities in the EUI and BIPs**: some institutions are using the Erasmus+ funding, however the overall global envelope has not increased which is a significant challenge.
- **Easier processes** for the requests of additional funding

⁵ Green Erasmus Portal, Green Erasmus Project, Sept. 2020 - Feb. 2022: <https://www.greenerasmus.org/>

Digitalization

One of the priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-27 is digital transformation.

A key role in the realization of this horizontal dimension sits with the European Student Card Initiative⁶. The Coimbra Group acknowledges the inherent value and worthiness of the initiative. However, the implementation is hindered by substantial issues.

International Offices are compelled to prioritize addressing technical challenges. Frequently, International Officers find themselves unable to independently address these technical issues, necessitating the engagement of IT specialists for fundamental mobility implementation steps. This situation, which has become quite common in current Erasmus+ work, is causing unnecessary delays and stress and needs to be addressed.

There are still many difficulties on the part of some members in the transfer of IIA and OLA. It is very time consuming as every online submission must be checked by mail or phone as the rate of complete submissions is consistently very low. Focusing on multiple time consuming processes (IIAs, OLAs, ESC, Erasmus App) decreases the level of efficiency of IROs and delays the achievement of results.

We do consider the launching and the actions undertaken within the “Interoperability

⁶ European Student Card Initiative, Part of the Erasmus+ programme, European Commission: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/european-student-card-initiative?pk_source=website&pk_medium=link&pk_campaign=hp&pk_content=hp-cta-esci

reinforcement plan” as going in the right direction. The ESCI Service Desk proved to be helpful regarding interoperability issues between the systems used by different European HEIs.

Recommendations

- It is fundamental for the European Commission to carry out **detailed checks on the feasibility of the initiatives** promoted through wider consultation and an established test and trial phase.
- It would be more fruitful to focus on the digitalization of **one process at a time** and move to the next one once the previous is fully functioning.
- It would be useful to provide **additional funds** to the Universities that are implementing the digitization process.
- It would be most welcome to have a mechanism within EWP to renew the digitally signed IIAs for the new Erasmus+ Programme Editions with “**one click**”. This way, the process of renewing the IIAs through EWP in the future would be much less time consuming.

Beneficiary Module

The Beneficiary module (BM) allows the Institution participating in the Erasmus+ projects to access the project information and to encode activities and participants, request individual participant reports and submit final reports to their National Agencies. Although it is clear on our

side that a platform where we can manage the project information is needed, we should point out some difficulties related to the use of BM. Some fields are not easy to fill in or are not necessary, at least for some categories. In principle, the application should be more user friendly, provide more information already pre-filled and avoid asking for information if not clearly related to the specific mobility being reported.

In recent months we have noted some improvements. These developments are also based on users (International Offices) reporting errors to their National Agencies, which subsequently report them to the Commission. The Coimbra Group is itself a contributor to these enhancement efforts and very much appreciates the collaborative work ongoing in this area.

Recommendations

- Digital tools should be released only when they are fully ready and suitable to use.
- There should also be **better and faster communication** of the requested information in the tool for third party provider software (such as Mobility Online, Moveon, Solemove etc).
- It would be useful **to insert all ECHE holding universities in the Beneficiary Module by the EC**, otherwise each university has to create and to import the data for the partner universities in each single project.

- The “distance of the Erasmus mobility” field should be obligatory only for mobilities which are related to the green travel-top-up.
- It is crucial to implement **significant modifications in the beneficiary module** to facilitate the reporting of BIPs. Specifically, it is recommended that the hosting organization take the responsibility for reporting incoming mobilities. Additionally, regarding the data already outlined in the Beneficiary Module, enhancing transparency would be beneficial. Specifically, the coordinating university should have visibility into the names of participants reported by partner universities. This measure would contribute to a more comprehensive and streamlined reporting process, fostering better collaboration and information sharing among the involved entities.
- It is essential that there will be a **budget overview in the BM for the KA 171** in order to have an overview for the different mobility flows and the budget breakdowns per country. It would make it a lot easier to keep track of how much funds have been allocated for each country, how much has been used and how much is left. It would also be very helpful if the budget tab could show transfers between categories (SMS, STA, STT) and countries.

Final Remarks

In this position paper we have considered the impact of the Erasmus+ Programme and the relevance of its actions for the social, educational and professional development of all European citizens. Our unconditional support for the Programme and recognition of its value led us to presenting this document and the recommendations it outlines. We conclude the document summarizing some key general points below. We invite the European Commission to consider the practical recommendations presented.

- Provide more **explicit guidelines with concrete and common specifications** to ensure standardized practices among National Agencies.
- **Simplify administrative requirements** providing a more straightforward and intuitive management of the programme.
- Ensure a more **seamless integration with other EU programmes, particularly Horizon Europe**. Measures should be implemented to guarantee a closer connection. This strategic alignment is essential for fostering synergy and maximizing the collective impact of initiatives within the broader European framework.
- Allocate **dedicated funds for each type of programme and action**, including but not limited to the European Universities Initiative (EUI), and Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs). Ensuring targeted

financial support will enhance the effectiveness of each initiative, and avoid removing much needed funds from traditional KA131 mobility.

- **Advocate for the harmonization of diverse national rules, procedures, and regulations** to foster a cohesive and streamlined approach, promoting consistency and efficiency across the broader framework.
- **Support every effort for Switzerland and the United Kingdom to get back into Erasmus+** given the longstanding mobility and cooperation tradition with these two countries.
- Advocate for a **strong budget** for the Programme in the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (2028-2034) by allocating at least the same level of funding to the next Erasmus+ Programme as in the current period (2021-2027). This is fully justified by the fact that it is the most successful and impactful programme on European society.

„Our unconditional support for the Programme and recognition of its value led us to presenting this document and the recommendations it outlines”

References

“Building on the success of Erasmus+:

Recommendations for the interim evaluation of the programme (2021-27)”, European University Association, November 2023:

<https://www.eua.eu/resources/publications/1081:building-on-the-success-of-erasmus.html>

“ESNs survey XV - Preliminary Report”, Erasmus Student Network, September 2023:

<https://www.esn.org/news/launch-preliminary-results-xv-esnsurvey>

“Position paper: CIVIS asks for a revision of the eligibility criteria of Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs)”, CIVIS, Europe’s Civic University Alliance, August 2023:

<https://civis.eu/storage/files/civis-position-paper-review-on-eligibility-criteria-of-bip-august-2023.pdf>

“Erasmus+ Review 2021-2022: Higher Education – student and staff mobility”, European University Foundation, European Students’ Union and Erasmus student Network, May 2023: https://uni-foundation.eu/uploads/2023_Erasmus+review2021_2022.pdf

“Erasmus+ Programme Guide”, European Commission, April 2023: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-04/ErasmusplusProgramme-Guide2023-v3_en.pdf

“Erasmus+ annual report 2021”, European Commission, December 2022,

<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/>

[/publication/ff16650b-7b6e-11ed-9887-01aa75ed71a1](https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/publication/ff16650b-7b6e-11ed-9887-01aa75ed71a1)

“Final evaluation of the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ Programme and mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027”, Erasmus Student Network, September 2022:

https://www.esn.org/sites/default/files/news/final_and_midterm_evaluation_erasmus.pdf

“Communication from the Commission on a European Strategy for Universities”, European Commission, January 2022:

<https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-01/communication-european-strategy-for-universities-graphic-version.pdf>

Green Erasmus Portal, Green Erasmus Project, Sept. 2020 - Feb. 2022:

<https://www.greenerasmus.org/>

European Student Card Initiative, Part of the Erasmus+ programme, European Commission:

https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/european-student-card-initiative?pk_source=website&pk_medium=link&pk_campaign=hp&pk_content=hp-cta-esci

— Coimbra Group, December 2023