



COIMBRA GROUP POSITION PAPER ON ERASMUS+

Erasmus+: THE flagship European Programme

In its 30 years, the Erasmus Programme has become one of the most successful marks of the European Union. In a field so multifarious as Education is, where European-wide policies are not in place and are envisaged in the frame of the Open Method of Coordination, Erasmus+ brought a European rather than multi-national view and eventually reached the status of the most tangible embodiment of the European idea: millions of students from all EU countries temporarily took to other EU geographic horizons in what seems to be the largest mass free movement of persons in the frame of a designed, funded and implemented programme. The academic accomplishments of the Erasmus Programme are matched by its social and cultural achievements, including evolving successive European citizenship minded generations and, of course, what is called the Erasmus generation itself.

The Coimbra Group is proud to remember its contribution to the design and early implementation of Erasmus, 30 years ago, and also its continuous front-stage involvement in Erasmus-Socrates-LLP-Erasmus+. Indeed, one in six Erasmus students comes to or from a Coimbra Group member university.

Cherished by EU institutions, students and academics alike, Erasmus (+) has become a permanent point of reference in educational planning at most universities in the EU. It is therefore necessary that institutions have a direct say and involvement in the continuous evolution of the programme – including through position papers such as the one at hand.

Major challenges

The established and respected status of Erasmus+ in Europe (and beyond) comes with responsibilities for this programme. No other programme has such huge potential to shape academic exchanges – their content and their dimensionality. Consequently, Erasmus+ has the responsibility to address the major problems and challenges of Europe. Education, academic life, academic exchanges have never brought immediate solutions to urgent or long-term threats, but they have always paved the way towards successful and comprehensive long-term solutions.

While employability and citizenship have always been at the core of Erasmus, recent escalation of specific menaces and threats to Europe bring urgent goals to the forefront of European educational programmes – in particular Erasmus+. Waiting for the budgetary cycles to change (next time, in

2021) before acting is not a choice in a rapidly changing context. The convincing integration of European values (not just European topics in general) and critical thinking into the education acquired by all young EU persons is instrumental in preventing and addressing issues such as radicalisation - to name just one major threat. Creating intercultural awareness, intercultural learning spaces and fostering critical citizenship 'at home' and in the community for non-exchange students and staff should also be a priority.

Such fundamental educational goals must be embraced and emphasised by EU educational programmes in general and Erasmus+ in particular; Jean Monnet, as well as Strategic Partnership and Youth projects should be more focused on them.

Aside from these issues related to critical citizenship as a strategic goal of educational programmes, there are concerns linked to a potentially unbalanced focus regarding employability. Conceptually, the over-emphasis on immediate employment and "applied skills" hampers sound education for career-long employability in a rapidly evolving labour market and society, where Higher Education graduates should not only respond to requirements, but also shape the future.

Key Actions in Mobility for Higher Education, 103 and 107

Erasmus+

Designing Erasmus+ as a single programme has been a positive development. The attempt to rationalise the programme has by and large been a success. Erasmus+ is clearer compared to previous programmes and, generally speaking, more user-friendly. The fact that there is one Programme Guide for all actions is helpful for writing and implementing projects. The overall increase in funding (though not at the initially promised level) is instrumental for making Erasmus+ fully effective.

Opening Erasmus+ to practically all countries in the world makes it the most comprehensive academic exchange programme world-wide.

One negative aspect is related to the general expectation that such successful LLP (Life-long Learning Programme) actions as Intensive Programmes (IP) be continued at least on the same scale under Erasmus+. Unfortunately, the current inclusion of Intensive Short Programmes (ISP) under the umbrella of Strategic Partnerships drastically diminishes the number of financed ISPs and their impact as flexible instruments for internationalization, particularly for students who find longer-term mobility difficult or in the doctoral cycle.

Key Action 103 (KA-103)

The possibility for a student to have up to 36 months of Erasmus+ individual experiences during a complete 3-cycle studentship enhances the EU-wide beneficial effects of Erasmus+, through targeting multiple destinations and through the longer overall duration. There is a noticeable (and growing) popularity of work placements for graduates, with very good consequences for (immediate) employability. Facilitating the eligibility of doctoral candidates brings Erasmus+ closer to the essence of (Humboldtian) universities – interlacing teaching and learning with research. The emphasis on teaching assignment grants (STA) not only contributes to developing joint teaching, joint curricula, and exchange of good practice with new teaching and learning methods, but also to long-term prospects of Erasmus+ bilateral exchanges and projects. Staff training grants (STT) have direct benefits in exchanging good practice and enhancing student services, as well as in increasing the number of Erasmus+ partnerships.

There are, however, also some aspects in need of revision.

The administrative burden has not been reduced. There are still time-consuming administrative procedures and an increased administrative burden for Higher Education Institutions, in particular for the International Offices and the grantees, in terms of the complexity of documents, comprehensive reporting (which is, however, regrettably more focused on statistics rather than the content of mobility), compatibility of electronic tools. There is an over-emphasis on online language tests and weak support for effective on-site language courses. The on-line tests which have been developed do not generate language competence certificates which meet the recognition criteria imposed by many European universities.

Key Action 107 (KA-107)

A very positive feature of Erasmus+ is its world-wide opening through KA-107. Academic exchanges in a fully-fledged international frame will surely make Erasmus+ globally relevant and important for Higher Education. In many partner countries, capacity building through KA-107 will be an important side effect. Key Action 107 allows a continuation of the kind of exchanges which were made possible by Erasmus Mundus Action 2 (EMA2) – a programme which has been discontinued in the Erasmus+ frame. Unfortunately, there is a lack of integration of EMA2 best practice into Erasmus+ KA-107. Events where universities with extensive EMA2 experience could share their practice and findings in cooperating with partner countries (particularly on specific challenges such as visas, residence permits, diversity of learning methods, the need to simultaneously undertake capacity building tasks), could be instrumental in increasing the overall impact of Erasmus+ KA-107. Similarly, better coordination of KA107 and Key Action 2 capacity building projects would certainly increase the impact of both actions, and give greater coherence to the programme as a whole.

A birds-eye comparison between KA-107 and EMA2 shows that, eligibility-wise, the exchanges under KA-107 exclude degree-seeking students, post-doctoral stages and do not yet include work placements – all of which diminish the size and diversity of the target groups, the contribution to linking teaching and research, and overall, the impact of the programme and the potential for improving employability and entrepreneurship in many partner countries. At a conceptual level, KA-107 exchanges are organised on a bilateral, rather than consortium, basis as in EMA2 and four-year projects are no longer possible - both issues lowering the capacity building potential of KA-107 compared to EMA2. In this context, simplification (compared to Erasmus Mundus Action 2) cannot be envisaged, let alone achieved: the need to elaborate on objectives, procedures, dissemination, sustainability etc. for each partner country and on a yearly basis leads to a significant amount of redundant project-writing work for universities in participating countries. On the issue of four-year projects, it is also worth mentioning that, while KA-103 is designed on a multi-yearly, entry-ticket based approach (the Erasmus+ Charter, ensuring that the fundamental principles of the programme are respected at the institutional level), KA-107 has a project-like approach with yearly institutional candidatures. In this early stage, this major difference between KA-103 and KA-107 is, perhaps, unavoidable. However, an important drawback is that in KA-107 institutions cannot plan strategically in terms of continuity and longer-term impact. As a consequence of this, and also because of financial limitations, the feasible institutional approach seems to be that of continuing (as far as possible) existing partnerships in partner countries rather than trying to expand the Erasmus+ exchanges to new partners. Providing equal opportunities to universities in partner countries and consequently to their students and staff remains an open problem for the future.

Decentralisation and simplification

Decentralisation. The main defining elements for Socrates-LLP-Erasmus – such as the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the documents and procedures for recognition of periods of study, as well as the European-wide competition for projects of the types now covered by KA2 and KA3 – have been, over time, designed and implemented under a centralised approach. However, some of the Erasmus+ components are currently designed under a distributed, decentralised approach, rather than in a pan-EU one. While, generally speaking, such a vision may be an appropriate way to tackle situations where various national approaches are significantly different, it is not clear why this decentralised frame had to be introduced in the specific case of an existing and already coherent European programme which only needed to be further developed. For example, the competition for Strategic Partnership (SP) projects is now national rather than European, despite the fact that the consortia and the funding are European.

Savings can certainly be made in terms of funds allocated for evaluation and selection of projects if these activities are carried out at the national rather than the European level. However, there is a heavy price to be paid for such (comparatively, modest) “savings for the sake of savings”. The selection mechanism does not guarantee that funded projects come up with ideas that are important from an EU perspective. The final results of the projects thus selected may eventually have a limited interest at the European level and hence limited dissemination and sustainability prospects. The way local developments in Higher Education would turn, through Erasmus+ funded projects, into European-wide advancements remains largely unchecked: the means to support, influence or adjust it in the decentralised approach are not made explicit. Furthermore, submitted SP projects do not receive equal opportunity treatment. Competitions in different countries are unevenly balanced and consequently some projects have been submitted in successive years to different National Agencies in hopes of a weaker or more favourable competition. Moreover, the evaluation process is prone to be subject to inter-country rather than unified tuning. Also, cross-cutting issues in final decisions regarding selection cannot be consistent in such a setting.

The promise of **simplification** raised many hopes; unfortunately it has not fully come through. Indeed, simplification in Erasmus+ has been presented as a goal and an advantage of decentralisation. However, in order to ensure the efficient and productive functioning of such a large-scale programme as Erasmus+, it was to be expected that decentralisation would require that tasks and responsibilities be redistributed between the European, the national and the institutional levels, rather than simplified. To a large extent, this is what has happened and there is no answer to date to the question “Simplification for whom?”. At the institutional level, some simplification is interlaced with an increase in bureaucracy. At the national level, the evaluation exercises raise new kinds of questions, relevant as well at the European level, as discussed above.

Six recommendations

- A comprehensive and more **centralized implementation** of Erasmus+ is the best way to further develop the most successful **European** programme of them all. This would both bring again European-wide relevance and impact to the forefront of project competition and would provide an equal opportunity based competition;
- An important benefit of a centralized implementation of Erasmus+ could be the restoring of **multilateral KA-107 exchanges** (as in EMA2), as opposed to the current bilateral ones. This would boost the European-wide (and international) impact of KA-107 both in terms of actual exchanges and in capacity building potential;

- **Four-year contracts** in KA-107 would boost the universities' Erasmus+ international strategic planning;
- As a possible tool for a shift towards such four-year contracts, Erasmus+ could launch a recommendation (not an obligation) for universities from partner countries to run for the **Erasmus+ Charter**, in annual calls;
- Restoring the **Intensive Programmes**, which have been instrumental for HE institutions for short-term mobility, for designing new curricula, projects, joint degrees, and for linking teaching and research, would meet a widely shared requirement of HEIs;
- Setting up an action offering grants to fund **full degree programmes** at postgraduate level would allow the programme to fulfil a truly capacity building role in many partner countries, where their main interest lies largely in such a tool in view of its potential to strengthen their higher education systems.

Erasmus+: responding to needs and challenges

Erasmus+ responds to fundamental needs in Higher Education: exchange of students, staff, ideas and joint academic work - all of which were brilliantly illustrated five hundred years ago by Desiderius Erasmus. The multi-level efforts towards improving this history-making programme are continuous. As an EU programme, Erasmus+ will continue to be instrumental for individual students and staff, for Higher Education institutions, provided that their ever-changing needs and challenges are adequately responded to through programme improvements. This position paper is intended to make a contribution towards this goal.

The Coimbra Group



The Coimbra Group is a European university network, which, since 1985, has promoted higher education and research cooperation. The Coimbra Group consists of thirty-eight comprehensive, long-established research universities from across Europe. It comprises key institutions for promoting staff and student mobility and fostering international mobility of doctoral candidates and early-stage researchers. It brings together members from all European regions. It has, therefore, a particular awareness of regional differences and the varying impact of economic and financial instability on different higher education and research systems. The Coimbra Group members put a strong emphasis on fundamental and blue-sky research and see the Humanities and Social Sciences as equal and integral parts not only of their teaching and research portfolio, but also of their contribution to society and economic development. Moreover, the Coimbra Group and its member universities have a long-standing tradition of global collaboration with institutions of research and higher education in other world regions. The Coimbra Group offers its contribution on the midterm review of Horizon 2020 proposal from the specific vantage point of these characteristics. <http://www.coimbra-group.eu>

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