



Coimbra Group position paper on the Erasmus+ Programme in the light of its first Work Programme and calls

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Introduction

The Coimbra Group is a longstanding network of 37 research-driven universities in 22 European countries, who share the conviction that international cooperation in its many forms is a central part of university life, and a driving force for the advancement of progress, of learning and for the enhancement of our own institutions. This is evident from our intense involvement in the many European Union programmes for academic cooperation which have been launched since the 1980s. In particular, our data indicate that our universities “see” (that is, either send or receive) approximately 20% of all student mobility on the Erasmus programme while accounting for only 1.5 million students in comparison with the EU’s approximately 20 million. Many of our activities are channelled through our eight Task Forces, three of which are geographical in scope (Africa, Caribbean and Pacific; European Neighbourhood; Latin American), and the remaining five of which are all thematically linked to the new European Union programme for Education, Sport and Youth (Culture, Arts and Humanities; Doctoral Studies and Research; Employment and Careers Guidance; eLearning; Education, Training and Mobility). Through these Task Forces, the Executive Board, our member universities and our central Office we have provided input for the development of, and subsequently participated intensely in, all the higher education cooperation programmes, both within and beyond the borders of the European Union: Lifelong Learning, Tempus, Alfa, Edulink, Erasmus Mundus Action 3, and our universities have been leading players in Erasmus Mundus Actions 1 and 2. We believe that this vast experience and strong proven commitment, together with our linguistic, cultural and geographical diversity, situate us as a key stakeholder in the Erasmus+ programme.

Previous statements on mobility and cooperation programmes

Since the beginnings of mobility programmes for higher education in the European Union, the Coimbra Group has taken a clear stance on mobility policy, expressed in several position papers available on our website (www.coimbra-group.eu). As we did for other EU programmes, throughout the prolonged period devoted to the design and development of Erasmus+, we have taken advantage of various different fora and other opportunities to express our opinion on how it was taking shape. Now that the first Work Programme and the Programme Guide have been published and the first calls launched, we believe it is the appropriate time to collect our views in this new position paper. We shall of course limit our observations to those actions affecting higher education.

Major issues put forward in our previous position papers are:

- Mobility should be defined in a more comprehensive and flexible way, allowing stays of under three months and allowing the possibility of splitting the mobility period where appropriate, particularly at doctoral level.
- Programmes should concentrate on quality mobility, focussed on academic content, competences and learning outcomes.
- Genuine efforts should be made to promote mobility through further funding (e.g. by universities themselves and encouraging national governments to do the same), if mobility targets such as attaining 20% of graduates with an international experience by 2020 are to be reached.
- Transparent recognition procedures are essential for the achievement of consistent high quality academic standards.
- Teaching staff exchanges should be promoted and the central role of academic staff as multipliers of mobility should be recognized, given their intrinsic importance in developing both an international and inter-sectoral mobility culture.
- Considerable additional support should be given to doctoral and young researcher mobility.

- A diversified concept of employability should be promoted to underline the need in our knowledge society for graduates with the necessary skills, creativity, adaptability, critical ability and knowledge to function as aware, responsible individuals and mature citizens.
- Permanent attention should be paid to the societal role of universities and their links with local and regional authorities, enterprises and organizations for increased mobility of students, teaching and non-teaching staff, at national, international and inter-sectoral levels.

Analysis of the new programme

In the light of these previous recommendations, and the experience of the Coimbra Group in both intra- and extra-European cooperation, the Coimbra Group welcomes the new Erasmus+ programme, in particular with regard to the budgetary increase in times where cuts in higher education in many contexts are seriously affecting universities; we must, however, also emphasise the serious reservations we hold about many aspects of the programme, including its underlying ethos and its implementation. This section is divided into those aspects we find entirely positive, those about which we hold reservations and those which we see as negative.

Positive aspects

- ❖ We applaud the budget increase obtained for the programme, particularly in the light of current budget cuts for higher education in some member states. The European Commission is to be commended for defending the principle that only through education and research can Europe as a whole recover from the current economic crisis whilst upholding the values of our inclusive, cohesive and democratic societies.
- ❖ The grouping of prior programmes under one single umbrella is a positive step, and the Coimbra Group welcomes this measure, adopted despite considerable pressure from groups desiring to maintain the brand names of some of the previous programmes. It remains unclear, however, how the eventual compromise reached that some brand names would be maintained under the new umbrella programme will actually be implemented, and we are concerned that this may cause some confusion.
- ❖ The emphasis placed on explicit institutional international strategies is to be applauded, as the internal reflection required to draft these strategies should promote broader institutional awareness and involvement in the role of international cooperation as a driver of institutional advancement.
- ❖ We welcome the promotion of staff mobility of all kinds included in Erasmus+, together with the recognition of the strong multiplier effect of both teaching and non-teaching staff mobility for the internationalisation of our universities.
- ❖ We welcome the greater flexibility introduced with regard to the duration of mobility, in particular the possibility of participating in a maximum of 12 months' mobility per cycle of studies, together with the reduction of the minimum stay to two months for work placements. We would have welcomed further flexibility in lengths of stays, especially at doctoral level, where the minimum of three months proves at times prohibitive for candidates. Allowing doctoral candidates to split their period abroad into several short stays would greatly enhance the attractiveness and effectiveness of Erasmus+ at third cycle level.
- ❖ Finally, we are pleased to see the continuity of all three cycles in the programme, after initial doubts regarding the third cycle, and the intention that all doctoral activity would be transferred to the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. The MSCA actions are a magnificent boost to early career researchers and to joint doctoral activities between universities, but their extremely competitive nature means that they should be complemented, as has finally been the case, by more open actions such as those foreseen under Erasmus+ Key Action 1.

Reservations

- ❖ Although we strongly welcome the desire to simplify the programme and its management, we remain unconvinced that the implementation of the programme will actually achieve this goal. Our Education, Training and Mobility Task Force has analysed some of the measures already announced or in place, and is deeply concerned that they actually complicate previously simple documents and procedures, cases in point being the inter-institutional agreements, the learning agreement (at the time of drafting this document still in draft form at this late stage of preparations for 2014-15 mobility), the current implementation of the Mobility Tool or the on-line application systems (the recent last-minute extension of the deadline for Key Action 1 is a clear example). The Task Force has further expressed concern that newly introduced elements such as the pre- and post-mobility language placement tests or the on-line language training, whilst laudable of course in their aims of furthering language competence and assessing the impact of mobility thereon, may also be an additional burden on students organizing their stays abroad and on already overstretched international offices at universities.

- ❖ As a network heavily involved in cooperation with other regions of the world, we wholeheartedly welcome the inclusion of international, extra-European mobility in the programme, together with reinforced concern for capacity building in cooperation with third, now termed partner, countries. We are, therefore, deeply disappointed that most of these actions, those funded under Heading 4, have not been included in the first Work Programme, and are thus also absent from the first calls for proposals. We are further concerned that the total budget for these actions will be insufficient to ensure widespread participation: 135,000 mobilities in both directions for all programme countries and institutions to cover all partner countries and regions of the world, while welcome, is a low figure in comparison with existing and proven potential for cooperation.
- ❖ With regard to vertical mobility, it has thus far been a fairly marginal concern of European Union programmes, the exception of course being Erasmus Mundus Actions 1 and 2. The former (EMA1) has, however, been a very minority action, even with regard to the already minority impact of joint programmes on mobility in general. While we recognize the value of an “excellence initiative” of the kind it promoted, the Coimbra Group believes that joint programmes leading to joint or dual/multiple awards should also be promoted in a more widespread fashion, without the need for the high levels of funding for individual students which have characterized the prior version of this programme, which limit the number of programmes funded to the point of becoming a disincentive for academics and institutions to participate. The impact is, unfortunately, to be especially noticeable in the first calls for Joint Master’s Degree proposals under Erasmus+, which are restricted in their funding and hence in the number of programmes which will be approved, due to commitments undertaken under the previous EMA1.
- ❖ We are further especially concerned that, aside from the JMD initiative, vertical mobility is to be promoted only by a loan scheme under the new programme, and share the concerns expressed by student organizations and some member states in this regard.
- ❖ While we welcome the opportunities offered under Erasmus+ for inter-sectoral cooperation, we are concerned that the dimension foreseen for these projects under Key Action 2 will limit their effectiveness, as only very few Knowledge Alliance projects will be approved and funded, and the vast majority of universities will be unable to reap the benefits.
- ❖ The new programme expresses a welcome intention to promote quality mobility, and to monitor adherence to the principles of the Erasmus Charter. The Coimbra Group would, nonetheless, like to stress the importance of reinforcing true academic quality of mobility and other actions, which should never be reduced to the implementation of bureaucratic tools. (This is clearly exemplified in the draft learning agreement for mobility between programme countries.) The experience of the Coimbra Group indicates that the implication of academics in the design and follow-up of mobility and other actions, and their close coordination with highly qualified professional administrative staff, is essential if enhanced quality of mobility is to be a key outcome of the new programme.
- ❖ As a pan-European network of universities, we have always been firm defenders of multilateral approaches to mobility of all kinds. We are disappointed, thus, to see that mobility consortia under KA1 are only national in nature, as this seems to contradict the added European value of the programme. This is especially the case for mobility with institutions in partner countries, where the added value of multilateral consortia under Erasmus Mundus Action 2 has been a key element in the success of this programme and the establishment of sound links with partners, and the promotion of the European Higher Education Area (see the Alisios project for further analysis).
- ❖ A concern we held in the light of some of the earlier programme proposal documents was that the alignment of the new programme with the European Higher Education Area, while underlying the various key actions and cooperation activities, was not explicit enough. This seems to have been remedied to some extent in the actual Work Programme, Guide and other accompanying documents, including, for example, the ECTS Guide, currently under review.

Negative aspects

These reservations necessarily link into the characteristics of the programme about which we would like to express direct concern, in particular regarding the programme’s priorities, ethos and approach.

- ❖ A very serious concern for the Coimbra Group is the increased decentralization of the programme’s decision-making processes to national level, to national agencies and authorities. Whilst the involvement of national authorities responsible for education is essential for the programme to be successful, it is also the case that the programme runs the risk of losing its truly European nature, and hence one of the great virtues of its predecessors. Many analyses of the Bologna Process come to the conclusion that national diversity has frequently prevented much true convergence from taking place; analysts speak of 47 Bolognas, instead of the convergent process to a single European Higher Education Area initially envisaged. It would be a great pity after so many years of success in the Erasmus programme, in particular in the forging of a European identity, to find ourselves with 33 different Erasmus+ programmes, dependent on national interpretations. Some evidence exists that this is already happening. We would like to express particular concern over top-up funding, over criteria for the award of funds for mobility with partner countries, over the inexplicable limiting of mobility consortia to national level, and over the evaluation of strategic partnership proposals at

national level. (At a purely practical level, for example, in at least one case, experts have recently been recruited at national level to evaluate projects with a language requirement of only B1, lower than the programme recommendation for participation in staff mobility!)

- ❖ There has been a clear shift in the programme from the long-term objective of promoting quality higher education experiences in order to foment the consolidation of a People's Europe, to a narrow short-term view of education as training for immediate employment. While the Coimbra Group clearly does not in any way wish to question the importance of graduate employability in the current economic crisis, we believe it is essential to emphasize the difference between short-term employment and long-term employability and adaptability to an ever-faster changing world, and the central role of higher education in educating adaptable, flexible and critical citizens for an increasingly complex future society, where essential values may come under threat.
- ❖ The programme seems, in many aspects, also to have slipped from a social, educational approach to mobility and cooperation to a more managerial and administrative approach to the activities it contemplates. As a minor example, it is striking in this sense that at launch meetings for the programme around Europe one of the central issues under debate was how to obtain and submit the participating institution code (PIC).
- ❖ Another concern regards the loss of some of the flexible instruments offered by the previous Lifelong Learning Programme, such as the Intensive Programmes. We do appreciate that they may be included as an action under the Strategic Partnerships, but are concerned that this broader framework may limit the number of potential IPs, and act as a dis-incentive for proposal submissions.
- ❖ Finally, we must regret the very late adoption of the programme, which has complicated implementation, especially of Key Action 1 student mobility for 2014-15. As examples of the practical difficulties this has provoked, the finalizing of inter-institutional agreements has been delayed by the uncertainty regarding the final form of the programme, leaving institutions reluctant to sign up to an undefined commitment; many universities have had to work without appropriate, or even with contradictory, instructions regarding the content of inter-institutional agreements; the delay in the publication of the template for learning agreements has led to contradictory instructions from different national agencies; use of the on-line Mobility Tool is being introduced in different ways in different national agencies to the accompanying disconcertment of our international offices. The delay in the calls for actions with institutions in partner countries has provoked a hiatus in cooperation activity, which is never desirable in the promotion of stable links built on mutual trust.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the Coimbra Group applauds the increased funding for the education, youth and sport programme, and commends the European Commission for this at a time when in many national contexts education budgets are suffering severe cutbacks. The Erasmus+ Programme brings the promise of innovation, simplification and greater flexibility compared to previous mobility and cooperation programmes for higher education, a promise which the Coimbra Group welcomes. It further offers an important opportunity for promoting more international cooperation beyond the borders of the European Union. Nonetheless, the Coimbra Group is concerned that the programme's overall approach moves away from the essential original underlying aims of the first Erasmus Programme and subsequent EU programmes, which met the needs and expectations of universities and other stakeholders and were, therefore, highly successful; that it will fall short of responding to the full potential of actions with partner countries; that it overemphasizes short term employment objectives which distort the overall higher education missions and timescales; that it dilutes the essential European character of previous programmes in favour of the national level; and that it runs a serious risk of granting greater importance to form than to substance.

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Coimbra Group
Executive Board