

Position Paper

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Europe needs Erasmus+ more than ever

The Guild's contribution to the Erasmus+
interim evaluation

We thank all the members of The Guild's Erasmus+ working group.

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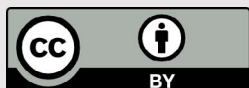
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Europe needs Erasmus+ more than ever: The Guild's contribution to the Erasmus+ interim evaluation

Introduction

Over the past 35 years Erasmus+ has demonstrated its European added value. Yet, the recent period of polycrisis has strengthened the arguments for even more cooperation in teaching and learning at the European level with Erasmus+ as the principal tool.

Providing high-quality education by scaling up pedagogical innovation will be one of the key tasks of the sector in the coming years. In doing so, we hope to increase the competitiveness of European universities globally. The need for change, however, should not compromise the fundamental mission of universities: providing deep subject knowledge, and stimulating enquiring minds, based on excellence in teaching, research and innovation. More than ever, young people's participation in democratic life needs to be promoted. In a world characterized by increased polarisation and challenges that can only be mitigated through international cooperation and understanding, Erasmus+ has a distinctive role in strengthening citizenship and the exchange of knowledge of young generations.

In this context it is important to reflect on how we view transnational cooperation in education and mobility more broadly. Currently, some basic assumptions of internationalisation are being challenged. We are witnessing concerns related to the number of international students and study programmes offered in English. At the same time, skills shortages are a concern of many governments across Europe. These issues require our full attention and nuanced debate among stakeholders and policy makers.

Erasmus+ is a very powerful tool for high-quality and inclusive education. Most recently, the European Universities alliances have promised to collaborate in new ways and provide an Erasmus+ experience for the majority of their students and staff members. A strong global dimension of the programme fosters mobility and cooperation with institutions around the world. Therefore, Erasmus+ and universities play a key role in promoting Europe as an attractive destination for talent. At the same time, Erasmus+ must play an even greater role in building sustainable partnerships with third countries as envisaged in the EU's Global Gateway strategy.

Concerning the implementation of the programme, we have witnessed the increasing complexity of the different Erasmus+ schemes. New features of Erasmus+ have not always been supported with funding for institutions managing the programme nor sufficient IT tools. Against this background, The Guild member universities reflect on the first years of Erasmus+ implementation with recommendations for improving the programme in the 2025-2027 period. They provide insights into how the programme could be further developed based on the lessons learned and by identifying areas where additional efforts could create a distinctive impact.

1. Rethink the current mobility models

- We should encourage harmonisation of different mobility types across the programme instead of looking through the lens of specific Erasmus+ actions such as Erasmus Mundus, International Credit Mobility, mobility within European Universities alliances etc.
- The eligibility criteria and the quality framework for blended intensive programmes should be streamlined to realise their full potential.
- Short-term PhD mobility should be made more attractive to doctoral candidates and administratively easier to manage.
- More flexibility in the current rules for eligible activities under staff mobility for teaching and training would be welcomed, especially when they strengthen the links between education and research.
- Continued cooperation with the United Kingdom and Switzerland and alignment of national schemes with Erasmus+ rules is needed, with the long-term goal of their reassociation to the programme.

Building on the key arguments of the Guild's Insight Paper [Transnational collaboration and mobility in higher education: Looking back – looking forward](#)¹, a conceptual shift to mobility is needed. We must move away from focusing on a 'singular' individual experience and 'state of being' to a process that provides opportunity for short- and long-term international learning embedded in the curricular and co-curricular offering of an institution, and that enables regional, national and international connectivity. Different learning experiences are needed to meet the diverse profile of students and the changing nature of needs and expectations. In a nutshell, a range of different designs is required to offer scalability of opportunity.

In its latest Skills and Talent Mobility package², the European Commission proposed to increase the 20% learning mobility target set in the context of the Bologna Process, to at least 25% of higher education graduates by 2030. Furthermore, learners with fewer opportunities³ should account for at least 20% of all learners benefiting from mobility abroad. It is therefore crucial that the Erasmus+ budget reserved for student mobility is increased to offer students of all study fields an exchange opportunity (physical, virtual or blended) as part of their degree.

The Guild recommends building on the experience of different Erasmus+ actions to improve our understanding of mobility. Different units at universities and within the European Commission should exchange good practices in organising mobility activities across the board. The programme has introduced new features to respond to the different needs of mobility participants, so we should encourage mutual learning to achieve better harmonisation.

The introduction of blended mobility, including the blended intensive programmes (BIPs), has been welcomed by the sector as a flexible tool to boost participation in mobility, and to test innovative teaching and learning practices. There is however a need for a quality framework with further guidance on designing blended courses and organising blended mobility, especially its virtual component. Building on the experience of the sector, we invite the European Commission to provide resources regarding good practice examples. Furthermore, we welcome reducing the minimum number of Erasmus+ participants in BIPs to 10, and propose counting participants from Bologna countries and/or funded by Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility towards the minimum requirements as they also contribute to the delivery and success of BIPs.

Introducing grants for short-term mobility of PhD students has been a valuable addition to the programme. Erasmus+ Annual Report 2022 shows that 1.3% of student mobilities in 2022 were mobilities of doctoral candidates, including one third as short-term student mobility and two thirds as traditional long-term student mobility. Given that the implementation of short-term PhD mobility follows the same administrative requirements as a semester long mobility, PhD students often participate in student mobility for traineeships, staff mobility or BIPs instead. Greater flexibility in the scope of activities and higher grants for short-term mobility could make PhD mobility more attractive.

Opportunities for academic and administrative staff under Erasmus+ are key in enhancing competences and establishing partnerships with universities across Europe. These activities should be further promoted and better reflect both education and research activities performed by individual staff members.

The Guild strongly supports continued cooperation with the United Kingdom and Switzerland as a priority in the 2025-2027 period. Aligning different schemes (Turing, Taith, Scottish Education Exchange Programme, Swiss-European Mobility Programme) with Erasmus+ rules as much as possible would contribute to the simplification of the current landscape. This includes the use of Erasmus+ templates, and better communication about the eligibility of different scholarships, with the ambition of reassociation of the United Kingdom and Switzerland to the Erasmus+ programme.



2. Address green and inclusion priorities in a meaningful way

- The programme should raise its ambitions for environmental sustainability and green practices. Beyond sustainable travel options, Erasmus+ should support mainstreaming sustainable practices at the institutional level.
- The green travel grant should be increased. At the same time, the programme should encourage raising awareness among students and staff about their carbon footprint. The Guild joins the calls of other stakeholders for interrail (Green pass) for all Erasmus+ students as an effective policy measure.
- There is a need for greater transparency in defining the criteria for students with fewer opportunities to ensure that we target those who otherwise would not be able to go abroad. The current diversity in national approaches might increase the gap between the lowest and highest grants received by Erasmus students.
- The programme should provide additional incentives and guidance for universities to achieve higher inclusion rates.

In 2022, 11% of Erasmus+ students and 16% of staff members used sustainable means of transport. Although financial incentives alone are not enough to make the programme greener, we support calls for an increased top-up grant to encourage change in travel behavior. We have already witnessed good practices where students travel as a group to attend BIPs or opt for a study destination which is easier to reach in a sustainable way. Also, some universities subsidize green travel with their own funding or Erasmus+ organisational support. Since green practices depend on the overall university policy, the programme could support projects and student-led initiatives which aim at mainstreaming sustainable practices at the institutional level and empower students to engage in the transition towards sustainability.

Guild members note the high administrative burden of checking evidence of green travel compared to the grant amount students receive. We suggest a streamlined process where green travel is based on the participant's declaration of honour. If there is a need to check travel documents, this could be done during the final payment phase.

Inclusion as a priority starts already from the admission stage and university support services. If we wish to address the inclusion and diversity priority in a meaningful way, financial incentives along with specific support measures are needed. The Inter-Institutional Agreement could note which support measures from home university will be provided during the mobility at the host institution. In 2022, 12% of students benefited from a top-up grant for participants with fewer opportunities. Since the criteria for the inclusion top-up is decided at the national and/or institutional level, the target groups differ across the different higher education systems. In some cases, certain groups of students are not covered. On the other hand, very wide eligibility criteria at some universities created concerns about budget limitations and the transparency of the selection process. As a result, the diversity in national approaches could increase the gap between the grants received by Erasmus+ students. To ensure we target those participants most in need, greater transparency in defining the criteria for top-up grants for participants with fewer opportunities is needed.

3. Develop a holistic approach to digitalisation

- Digitalisation of the Erasmus+ mobility management should be driven by the university community.
- Since the digitalisation agenda has a substantial impact on financial and human resources of universities, organisational support funding should reward these efforts.
- Digitalisation should be used as an opportunity to evaluate and simplify Erasmus+ administrative processes.
- More efforts should be made for the Beneficiary Module to be fully functional. If the Beneficiary Module is not working properly, there is a lack of a control mechanism.

We welcome recent steps by the European Commission and the Erasmus Without Paper+ (EWP+) consortium to better support universities in implementing the digitalisation roadmap. Universities wish to see a more holistic approach towards digitalisation since we are not just replacing paper management with digital tools. Digitalisation is not an end goal, and we should rather focus on why we wish to digitalise. Also, piloting and testing at the same time has put additional pressure on already scarce IT resources at universities. Testing new functionalities should be done on a smaller scale first, for example in testing groups consisting of developers and university representatives.

Similarly, The Guild would like to see more resources put in place into developing systems which meet universities' needs rather than into monitoring compliance with the digital requirements. Instead of introducing deadlines for digitalising processes, we encourage further exchanges between different third-party providers and EWP+ consortium. Here, we would like to emphasize the importance of keeping Swiss institutions fully included in the EWP+ processes.

Our understanding of IT tools which are fit for purpose includes the following aspects: 1) flexibility to accommodate various institutional and European Universities alliances' needs, 2) high level of performance before the full rollout, 3) reliable and fast data exchange, 4) coverage of all types of mobility such as short-term mobility, blended intensive programmes, international credit mobility etc. Also, exchanged data needs to be compatible with other processing systems with no need to revise it manually. For instance, exchanged Inter-Institutional Agreement data could be used for automatic allocation of student nominations within third party systems.

We should use the current digitalisation efforts to simplify the administrative management, especially of new mobility formats such as short-term mobility, which have so far followed the same rules as semester long mobilities. Since the number of "non-traditional" mobilities is expected to grow in the future, we suggest simplifying the requirements for these types of mobilities. For example, we should evaluate whether Learning Agreements are necessary in case of short-term mobility or BIPs.

In that context, the European Commission should consider the need for long-term investment and sustainability of the EWP+ as a project. Predictability and stability of IT tools is the "back office" on which smooth implementation of the programme depends on.

The Beneficiary Module (BM) is less user friendly compared to the Mobility Tool. Several questions which need to be filled in by universities can be interpreted differently, making it difficult to provide accurate input. On the other hand, it is not clear why certain data cannot be filled in automatically by the BM or why it is being collected at all. In addition, dashboard functionalities and the possibility of aggregated information from the participants' reports would be appreciated to use the BM for more than just reporting purposes. The Guild members also propose developing interoperability between EWP+ and BM.

4. Enhance Cooperation Partnerships

- Ensure all study disciplines are represented under the horizontal and sector specific priorities of Cooperation Partnerships, especially projects from social sciences, arts, and humanities.
- Further promote Cooperation Partnerships as tools to support and enhance pedagogical excellence, and testing or scaling up interdisciplinary courses and innovative teaching practices.
- The introduction of the lump sum funding model has been welcomed, but there is a need for more clarity around reporting, audit procedures and quality assessment.
- Put more focus on scaling up successful Cooperation Partnerships and the use of different funding streams.

Erasmus+ horizontal priorities⁴, including sector-specific priorities⁵, provide a broad and relevant framework for project proposals under Cooperation Partnerships. Still, we should ensure participation of all academic disciplines and avoid submissions coming from applicants from the same faculties or departments.

At some universities interest in Cooperation Partnerships has been limited in the first years of Erasmus+. Possible reasons include uncertainty regarding the new lump sum approach; the need for more administrative capacity to support project coordinators; and limited budget available for this action in some countries. In general, the administrative effort for these types of projects is seen as high compared to the allocated budget. Also, the budget should take into consideration inflation costs.

The lump sum funding has brought flexibility, and the work package approach has encouraged contributions of all partners during the project proposal stage. However, the lump sum was introduced without piloting it first as was the case in the Framework Programme, and universities received very little information from the European Commission and national agencies. Additional confusion was created with the different implementation modes of lump sum funding for Erasmus+ centralized actions (customized) and decentralized actions (fixed). In addition, uncertainty around reporting and audit procedures has led to project coordinators documenting actual costs of project activities which goes against the lump sum approach. Additional guidelines are required also on the quality assessment process and the expertise of evaluators assessing the project deliverables.

Scaling up of project results often depends on the motivation and strengths of the project consortia. We suggest to put more focus on providing information about potential Erasmus+ funding and/or other EU funding instruments to promising projects to encourage scalability.

5. Reinforce the global dimension of the programme

- The global dimension needs a significant boost to achieve the European Union's geopolitical priorities, and for Erasmus+ to become a strategic tool for internationalisation.
- The experience of managing international outgoing mobility with internal policy funds should be used as a pilot to fully align the intra-European and global dimension of the programme in the future.
- International Credit Mobility needs greater flexibility in managing funding for different regions and better reciprocity between outgoing and incoming mobility flows.
- Capacity Building projects in higher education should be less prescriptive in their priorities and better reflect the links with academic disciplines. There is a need to change the narrative of these projects by including both the capacity building and mutual learning perspectives.
- The structure of the programme should reflect the turbulence of the times and leave enough flexibility to address new challenges. Next to flexibility, a dedicated scheme to support students and researchers at risk is needed.

If policymakers wish to realize the ambitions of the EU's Global Gateway strategy and the recent Skills and Talent Mobility package, Erasmus+ and universities must play an important role. But this requires sustainable investment and a change of narrative in building partnerships across the world. The Guild has already welcomed the AU-EU Innovation Agenda as a key step towards the development of equitable partnerships that will support the sustainable development of Africa and Europe. We wish to see higher education and research play a central role in the new relationship between the African Union and the European Union. This will require achieving economies of scale and the creation of long-term opportunities. In recent years, The Guild has developed collaboration with the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) and as a result we have launched 21 joint Clusters of Research Excellence (CoREs) between universities in Africa and Europe. While we see benefits in improving existing Erasmus+ instruments in the 2025-2027 period, we encourage the European Commission to develop instruments which would support equal and strategic collaborations between universities on both continents.

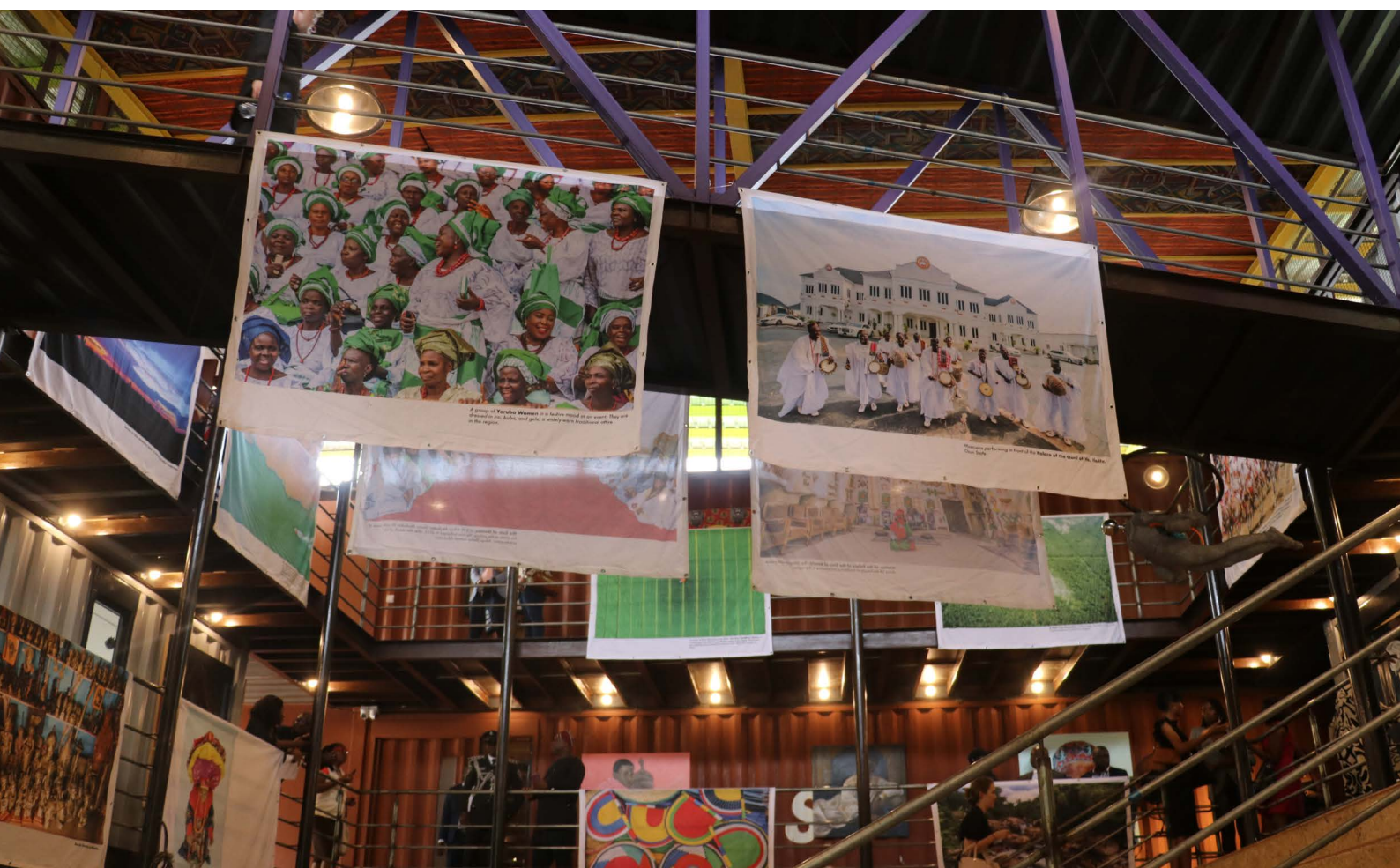
The opening of Erasmus+ to worldwide mobility in 2015 has been a great addition to the programme but with limited impact. The value of international mobility would be greater if EU external action instruments could boost the numbers of mobility and alleviate some of the implementation hurdles. In 2022, 12% of Erasmus+ mobilities were international mobilities⁶. The current project-based approach to International Credit Mobility (ICM) lacks predictability of funding which affects the long-term sustainability of university partnerships. Due to the low number of mobilities and the uncertainty of the application process, universities are not able to use ICM as a strategic tool for internationalisation. Moreover, limitations for outgoing mobility to several regions affect reciprocity and deny partner universities the benefits of having Bachelor and Master level students at their campuses. Unfortunately, the Erasmus+ funding of up to 20% of the budget to support outgoing international mobility has not been enough to compensate for these needs. Universities are already experiencing difficulties in motivating partners to sign Inter-Institutional Agreements. Concerning short-term mobility opportunities, the grants are insufficient to cover the actual costs, and green travel almost impossible with the current top-up grant. One good practice example is the use of Erasmus+ national mobility consortium where a number of universities jointly manage ICM to

maximise mobility opportunities. In the long run we could consider opening up these consortia to international partners. There is also potential to better utilize BIPs to include international partners.

As an immediate solution, The Guild suggests introducing greater flexibility in budget transfers for different regions and better reciprocity between incoming and outgoing mobility flows. In the long run, the programme would benefit from full alignment of intra-European mobility and its global dimension. In 2028 we expect the programme to better reflect the global ambitions of universities.

Capacity Building projects have great potential in demonstrating Europe's long-term commitment to addressing challenges in higher education systems around the world. However, the narrative of capacity building does not reflect the EU's ambition of developing equitable partnerships. Also, the current priorities which need to be addressed by applicants are viewed as too prescriptive with no clear links to specific academic disciplines. The prescriptiveness of the number and type of partners in the consortia is also limiting, while the budget benefits mostly European partners. To make better use of Capacity Building projects, we suggest focusing more on the potential of building the R&I capacity of local communities.

In recent years, global crises beyond Europe have posed an immediate challenge to universities, about how we can provide sufficient mechanisms to support scholars and students in need. It has become clear that support for persecuted academics and students too often relied on institutional commitments and national support schemes. The Guild has welcomed the European Commission's commitment to support incoming students from Ukraine and allow flexibility in Erasmus+ rules. But we also saw that Europe lacks dedicated schemes for students and researchers unable to carry out studies and research in their home countries. Europe must draw lessons from this crisis as well as past ones to stand up for academic freedom through a long-term, flexible and scaled- up support scheme for students and researchers at risk.



References and image credits

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2. Proposal for a Council Recommendation 'Europe on the Move' - learning mobility for everyone, 15 November 2023
3. People with fewer opportunities means people who, for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, a migrant background, or for reasons such as disability and educational difficulties or for any other reasons, including those that can give rise to discrimination under article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental rights of the European Union, face obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to opportunities under the programme. Source: 2024 Erasmus+ Programme Guide, Glossary, page 455
4. Inclusion and diversity; Digital transformation; Environment and fight against climate change; Participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement
5. Promoting inter-connected higher education systems; Stimulating innovative learning and teaching practices; Developing STEM/STEAM in higher education, in particular women participation; Rewarding excellence in learning, teaching and skills development; Building inclusive higher education systems; Supporting the digital and green capabilities of the higher education sector; Supporting innovation and entrepreneurial skills of students; Supporting HEIs in their cooperation with Ukrainian counterparts to respond to the war in Ukraine
6. Erasmus+ Annual Report 2022: Participants moving from/to third countries not associated to Erasmus+



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