

Start of the new Erasmus+ programme: Reality doesn't match the expectations

The Guild joins the calls of the higher education sector and stakeholders to alleviate implementation struggles in the first academic year of the new Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027).

Although the programme promised to be more inclusive and accessible, with an increased budget, universities are struggling to meet the mobility expectations. The actual level of funding universities received in 2021 for Key Action 1: Learning mobility was lower than the budget awarded in 2019 and 2020.

At the same time, there is high demand for study abroad after two years of travel restrictions. Also, Erasmus+ provides new opportunities such as top-up grants for environmentally friendly ways of traveling, short-term and blended mobility, and additional grants for participants with fewer opportunities: all of which need to be well planned and funded. In light of these circumstances, some countries estimate around 20-30% participants without funding (zero-grant).

Delays in the adoption of the new programme led to delays in the allocation of funding for universities, thus making planning extremely difficult. Universities are doing their best to support students by adopting strategies, but these are only quick fixes to plug the funding gaps. For example, using leftover funds from 2019 and 2020 projects does not allow students to benefit from the novelties of the new programme. Moreover, transferring institutional support grant to fund more mobilities diminishes the quality of services institutions are expected to provide.

Although each transition year brings certain difficulties, information channels between the European Commission, national agencies and universities should work better to provide timely guidelines. Digital tools should help, rather than hinder implementation. We strongly urge the Commission to consult universities in all discussions around digitalisation timelines and offer support in the transition period towards 'Erasmus Without Paper'. Given the challenges universities have experienced with intra-European mobility, it is particularly important to adopt a realistic digitalisation agenda for mobilities with partner countries: one that offers reliable infrastructure and support, without increasing the administrative burden on universities.

The Guild members expect the 2022/2023 academic year to bring additional challenges once the mobility budget from previous years is absorbed. Unfortunately, the 2022 Erasmus+ call offers only a slight increase of funding compared to the final year of the Erasmus+ programme.

Low levels of funding in the first years of the new programme, coupled with digital challenges and the pandemic uncertainty, could damage the quality and reputation of the programme which has proven its value over the past 35 years. We call on the Commission and national agencies to work together with universities on long-term solutions, as well as immediate solutions such as providing national co-funding, greater flexibility at reporting stage, and support mechanisms to reach the top-up targets. We must ensure a much smoother implementation in 2022.