

The Guild's recommendations for Erasmus+

## Empowering citizens and raising the aspirations for European higher education

The Erasmus+ programme and its predecessors have had an irreplaceable role in supporting the international engagement of European educational institutions and their students. As a flagship programme of the EU it has touched the lives of millions of European citizens by offering them the unique opportunity to study or work abroad. In doing so, it has been decisive in creating long-term impact by helping students develop their autonomy, cultural and social capital, problem-solving skills as well as their linguistic competencies and understanding of the cultural diversity of Europe. Universities are, in their very essence, places where ideas from all over the world come together and lead to inspiration and discovery. In strengthening cross-border mobility, the EU has transformed the quality of the student experience. By enabling meaningful intercultural encounters, Erasmus+ allows students to discover who they are, and what kinds of citizens they want to be. Besides developing employability, it has a distinctive role in enhancing citizenship, and facilitating transnational engagement with common European values as well as the exchange of knowledge among the generations that are so critical for the future of Europe.

In addition, the success of Erasmus+ lies in its contribution to the development of the quality of educational institutions, as mobility and strategic collaboration have been crucial for the exchange of ideas and understanding of best practice. Along with its predecessor programmes, Erasmus+ has significantly enhanced the European knowledge economy. Because of its widespread and substantial impact on the future of Europe, the budget for Erasmus+ needs to be increased. A strengthened budget would allow higher education institutions (HEIs) to fully realise the potential of their international collaboration, as well as to offer all students equal opportunities for international mobility as part of their curricula. It is crucial that Erasmus+ can build on its success and continue to be inclusive and effective in its outreach, maximising its European added value and impact on the consolidation and continued development of European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

In the following sections The Guild makes recommendations on how the existing programmes of Erasmus+ could be further improved, and where additional budget could create distinctive impact in delivering on its strategic goals.

## 1. Increasing the educational impact of Erasmus+

The Guild's recommendations for strengthening the educational impact of mobility programmes:

- Increase support for the development of linguistic and intercultural skills of exchange students through face-to-face teaching, and introduce incentives for students to study the national language of the host country.
- Strengthen support for the mobility of teaching and administrative staff in HEIs, to increase their opportunities for internationalisation.
- Introduce grants for the short-term mobility of PhD students.
- Offer opportunities for learning exchange that combines virtual and physical participation in the teaching activities through the Blended Mobility for Higher Education Learners instrument.

Supporting student mobility should continue to be the fundamental mission of Erasmus+, as it clearly has been successful in meeting its objectives. It is therefore crucial that the budget reserved for student mobility is sufficient to offer equal opportunities for all students to include an exchange period abroad as part of their degree.

However, mobility is not an end in itself. The Guild welcomes the increased focus on the programme's impact on the strengthening of students' linguistic and intercultural skills, employability, and their identities. For instance, data collected from students returning from their Erasmus exchange shows that the programme has a positive impact on the development of their language skills. Still, more funding and support could be offered for effective face-to-face language teaching for exchange students, to complement the Online Language Support system introduced in the current programme. According to the experience of the Guild's member universities, students should be encouraged to be more ambitious in learning the language of their host institution during their exchange period. Erasmus+ must improve its support for the broad linguistic diversity of Europe by encouraging students to learn the national language of the host university.

Support for the mobility of teaching and administrative staff has been an effective way of improving the overall quality and internationalisation of HEIs. The European Commission should further strengthen the mobility schemes for teaching staff as a way to raise the quality of education, and for the mobility of non-teaching staff as a driver for the internationalisation of universities, as well as to increase the emphasis given to the recognition of outcomes.

The Guild also suggests introducing grants for short-term exchange periods for PhD students, to allow them to benefit from the facilities and courses of universities abroad for a period of less than 3 months. This would help to address the needs of PhD students for shorter stays abroad, for example to collect data for their research.

The Guild recognises that there is still room for improvement in the geographical balance of the directions of mobility between different parts of Europe, as well as between the balance of outgoing and incoming students within universities. The Guild's member universities are committed to working together as a network to address these challenges and to extend the outreach of the programme. In addition, more attention could be paid to the ways in which different disciplines are encouraging their students to go abroad as part of their curricula, in order to avoid imbalances between disciplines. To

increase the outreach of student mobility across disciplines and study programmes, Erasmus+ should offer new ways of combining virtual and physical mobility by implementing the concept of Blended Mobility for Higher Education Learners through the Learning Mobility for Individuals (Key Action 1), and making it accessible to students from all higher education institutions. However, these opportunities should not entail a reduction in support for physical mobility.

## 2. Attracting international talent in European higher education

The opening of the Erasmus+ mobility scheme to partnerships between programme countries and partner countries all around the world has been a successful step towards an improved international outreach of the programme and European HEIs in general. However, The Guild suggests that additional funds should be used in the future to consolidate the attractiveness of European higher education, complementing the existing programmes for collaboration that goes beyond the borders of Europe, such as Erasmus Mundus and International Credit Mobility.

For Europe to become a pool of talent for the best students worldwide, The Guild calls for the establishment of a new flagship programme to highlight the global prestige of European higher education. This would entail a distinguished scholarship programme for international students from partner countries, equivalent to the Fulbright or Marshall scholarship schemes in the United States. The programme would provide an effective way of promoting the attractiveness of European higher education institutions. A distinctive feature of the programme could be to offer scholarships for students with outstanding academic abilities, who have also demonstrated leadership and engagement in public service, for instance in relation to challenges around the sustainability of our economies, societies, welfare, and cultures. The scholarship could be offered, for example, to 500 students annually, and it could be complemented by a summer school hosted by a European university, where all scholarship holders come together to share experiences and develop a sense of community.

## 3. Strengthening the career prospects of students

The Guild's recommendations for strengthening the career prospects of students through Erasmus+:

- Maintain a sufficient budget for internship grants in Erasmus+.
- Further encourage opportunities to include internships in study programmes across disciplines.
- Introduce new ways of supporting entrepreneurial education across disciplines in European HEIs.
- Increase the flexibility of the programme to improve the participation of students studying for a professional qualification.

Funding international internships has proven to be another successful part of Erasmus+ that has focused on improving the employability of young people, and its share of the overall Erasmus+ budget should be maintained. Since opportunities to include an internship as part of a university degree still vary between institutions and disciplines, the Commission should further encourage the integration of internships as part of study programmes at European HEIs.

When it comes to opportunities for the development of entrepreneurial skills, Erasmus+ should further promote internships at start-ups, SMEs and larger companies. Besides this, the European Commission should introduce new ways of supporting entrepreneurial education in European HEIs, also in disciplines that are not traditionally associated with entrepreneurial career prospects, such as the Social Sciences and Humanities. The Guild also supports introducing new incentives for universities to develop entrepreneurial skills, for instance through international summer schools.

We also advocate enhanced mobility support for students whose degree leads to graduating to a certain profession, for instance through the possibility of shorter exchanges. In some instances, outside partners (schools, law firms, social services, etc.) need to be provided with small financial incentives to provide opportunities for Erasmus students.

#### 4. Strengthening European citizenship and acquiring skills for the twenty-first century

The Guild's recommendations for strengthening the contribution of Erasmus+ on the development of European citizenship, intercultural engagement and transferable skills:

- Provide more funding for courses that support intercultural skills of students, and for courses introducing exchange students to the culture and society of the host country.
- Introduce support for teaching staff to adopt methods for actively engaging with cultural diversity in teaching.
- Further support the development of transferable skills through the existing Erasmus+ programmes.
- Create more alignment between Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020, for example through the promotion of internships in research and innovation projects funded by Horizon 2020.

Transferable skills are not only about improving the employment prospects of students, they are also about developing skills to understand and engage with the diversity of communities between and within European societies. The full potential of Erasmus+ needs to be leveraged to enhance European citizenship by supporting our students' reflections of their international experience, and by strengthening the international culture of the receiving institution. The Guild will therefore advocate for additional funding for host institutions to provide more courses on intercultural communications and other topics that help develop transferable skills.

In addition, teaching staff at HEIs should be offered opportunities through Erasmus+ to develop methods of engaging with cultural diversity of students in their classrooms, and the variety of perspectives they can bring to the teaching of all disciplines. This would support the development and mainstreaming of a "culturally diverse classroom" that actively creates intercultural dialogue. This could be further supported by engaging with the international experience of students returning from their exchange abroad.

As a network of research-intensive universities, the Guild also calls for better links between research, innovation and education in the schemes fostered by Erasmus+. With reference to the 'Open Science and Open Innovation' agenda within the EU's research and innovation policy, the Guild supports the

development of new types of transferrable skill sets to meet the demands of the labour market of a knowledge society. These types of new skills can be related for example to numeracy, creativity, interdisciplinary collaboration, digital literacy and capacity for statistical analysis.

In addition, links between education, research and innovation should be created on a programme level between Erasmus+ and the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (Horizon 2020). This could entail promoting opportunities for students to take part in Horizon 2020 projects through internships funded by Erasmus+. Links between the Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions (MSCA) and Erasmus+ could be created by using the suggested short-term grants for PhD students to participate in training courses and other activities for early-career researchers that are organised by the Innovative Training Networks of the MSCA.

## 5. Enhancing strategic support for institutional development

The Guild's recommendations on strategic support for institutional development in Erasmus+:

- Funding for Strategic Partnerships, capacity-building projects as well as Knowledge Alliances should be significantly increased as they provide unique opportunities for collaboration between European HEIs.
- Opportunities for smaller-scale projects to be funded through these actions should be introduced to allow more agility in the planning of the projects.
- Re-introducing the Erasmus "Intensive Programme" and "Curriculum Development" as separate programmes would enhance the opportunities for offering short study programmes for international audiences as well as longer-term collaboration on the development of curricula.

A transformative commitment to increase the capacity building and institutional enhancement of higher education institutions should be part of any Strategic Partnership. The Guild warmly welcomes the new programme for supporting Strategic Partnerships between higher education institutions, as they present an important way of establishing dialogue and project collaboration between HEIs, and build effective networks at a European level. However, funding for Strategic Partnerships should be significantly increased to improve the success rates of the programme, since its attractiveness has already suffered because of the unrealistically low success rates that have reduced the motivation to apply for many universities. This also applies to the Knowledge Alliances that provide a great opportunity for universities to develop innovative collaboration with the industry, but should be strengthened to maintain their attractiveness to potential beneficiaries. Besides the strengthening of the budget for these types of collaborative projects, introducing the opportunity to fund smaller projects with a more limited budget and number of partners would lower the threshold for participants to apply for funding, and still achieve significant impact with their project.

Moving the programme previously known as "Intensive Programme" under the heading of Strategic Partnerships has reduced its leverage, and at the moment projects aimed at facilitating short-term partnerships for developing new approaches to curricula have to compete with other types of projects under the same funding line. This also applies to the "Curriculum Development" programme, that covers joint designing of innovative study programmes. As separate actions, they would get more visibility and appear more attractive to potential applicants. The Guild calls for the re-introduction of these

programmes as separate actions that would allow more HEIs to benefit from this innovative and effective way of laying the groundwork for longer lasting partnerships and international collaboration in designing new approaches to education.

## 6. Increasing the user-friendliness of Erasmus+

The Guild's suggestions for the simplification and streamlining of actions under Erasmus+:

- More transparency is needed in the decentralised application process. The Guild supports moving back to the centralised management system of the Strategic Partnership calls.
- A simpler and more flexible system should be introduced to the application and management of International Credit Mobility scheme, for example by harmonising the rules of participation between Key Action 103 and 107. Increasing the length of the International Credit Mobility programme to three years would make it more sustainable and reduce the administrative burden of partners.
- More detailed descriptions of study, internship and PhD research under the current rules of participation for Key Action 1 are needed to highlight the differences between these grants and leave less room for ambiguity for beneficiaries, promoters and administrators.
- The stability of the programme must be guaranteed by avoiding changes in the format of applications, reporting or ICT tools during the course of the programme.
- The information available on different Key Actions in the programme guide, as well as on the websites of the managing authorities should be further clarified.
- More clarity is needed in presenting the required co-funding rates in a transparent way, as is done in the Horizon 2020 programme.
- Better tools are needed to search for information on different projects funded by Erasmus+ as well as the engagement of HEIs in the programme. Also, improved opportunities for disseminating the results and outcomes of the projects would increase the impact of the programme.

The Guild welcomes the recent simplification measures by the Commission to address the administrative burden of participating in the Erasmus+ programmes, for example by providing the digital Mobility Tool to report on mobility programmes. However, it has to be stressed that aligning separate funding actions with various objectives under the same headline doesn't necessarily lead to simplification from the perspective of participants. Additional simplification would further streamline the application process for project funding, as well as the reporting procedures for HEIs and grantees. Furthermore, improving the stability of rules for participation and procedures for the management of grants would significantly improve the user-friendliness of the programme.

Communication provided by the Commission on the differences between national and centralised application processes between different Key Actions needs to be further clarified. This is related to the broader need to increase transparency in the underlying principles of decentralised application processes and budget allocations to Member States. To simplify the application process of the Strategic Partnerships, The Guild suggests moving back to the centralised application system.