

# EUA's feedback for the European Commission's call for evidence on Erasmus+

The European University Association (EUA) and its members welcomed the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027, notably for its increased budget and new actions.

However, Erasmus+ 2021-2027 started with some delay. A majority of action lines are now about a year into implementation. Some, including the third country programmes, have yet to commence. Hence, the following contribution summarises the initial observations and evidence gathered from EUA's member institutions. It also outlines certain key issues, some of which have already been addressed in EUA's report for the 2016 Erasmus+ midterm review. These issues will be further explored in a membership consultation survey in autumn/winter 2022 that will inform EUA's contribution to the EU's public consultation in spring 2023.

In 2016, [EUA's recommendations](#) stressed the urgent need to enhance **funding** in light of low success rates in some parts of the programme. While the budget of the 2021-2027 programme has increased, it must also cover several additional actions with high costs, notably the European University Alliances. At this early stage, there is only very limited and preliminary evidence on whether success rates have in fact improved.

Despite the budget increase, the first year under the new programme (2021) saw a sharp drop in funding for student mobilities compared to the final year of the preceding generation of the programme (2019). 2022 student mobility budgets were also only slightly above 2019 levels. Several reasons have been cited for this, including the fact that multiannual funding programmes typically start off with lower budgets that then increase over the years. EUA has therefore called for [funding to be distributed more evenly](#) across the duration of such programmes. This approach would have saved students in 2021 from competing for a considerably lower number of mobility grants than those seen in the final years of the programme's previous generation.

The **programme structure** has not changed substantially compared to previous iterations, and most of the additions and changes seem justified, and may contribute to enhancement. It is however unfortunate that KA3 project actions with relevance for policy development can no longer be led by non-governmental actors unless they are delegated to do so by their ministry. This promotes an outdated understanding of policy making as a solely governmental matter. Whether KA2 projects and other action lines can serve as alternative instruments for the sectors' policy making contributions should be carefully considered.

EUA acknowledges and for the most part welcomes the programme's **simplification** efforts.

The lump sum approach brought a completely new funding model to Erasmus+. This is promising, but so far only a limited number of projects have started to use it, and no full project cycle has been completed. Initial

feedback from project participants suggests that there are uncertainties when it comes to the financial management and reporting of lump sum projects. Info days organised by the executive agency were rather vague on aspects such as requirements for financial and administrative documentation. While the formal administrative requirements for budget planning and reporting have clearly decreased, in the case of an audit, it remains unclear whether documentation and accountability requirements will actually be different from those under the previous programme. Therefore, experiences of this new approach, as well as any potential expansion to other parts of the programme, should be carefully assessed.

Overall, higher education institutions welcome the paperless implementation of Erasmus+, but have also reported problems, for example with the online platform. As of yet, steps towards the digitalisation of the programme may not have led to real simplification for higher education administrators. For instance, in some cases documents for mobile students must be available in digital and in paper format, therefore duplicating the work of international offices.

EUA has welcomed in 2020 the Erasmus+ programme's focus on inclusion and diversity, digital transformation and greening.

The emphasis on **environmental sustainability** in the project action lines, as well as additional top-ups for green modes of travel, are great first steps, but much more needs to be done. Efforts should be both scaled and sped up. Top-ups for green modes of travel should be increased, and they should also be made available for project travel, not only for student mobility. Project rules prescribing the most economical means of travel should be adapted, as greener modes of travel are often more expensive. Moreover, additional staff time for traveling via more ecological means of travel should be eligible.

Digitally enhanced exchanges can contribute to lowering the climate impact of interuniversity collaboration. However, EUA agrees with the European Parliament and other stakeholder organisations that **virtual formats** should not be deployed as a means to green the programme by replacing physical mobility. Virtual formats do not provide the same kind of learning experience, as many of the benefits of mobility are specifically derived from the immersion in another culture. But virtual learning exchanges and blended activities can be a good internationalisation tool, for instance as a starting point before physical mobility. Better recognition of virtual exchange and collaboration in terms of credits and funding would also support their enhancement and mainstreaming.

The objective to support the **digital** transformation and to increase the digital skills of learners and teachers through Erasmus+ projects is valuable. It is too early in the programme to judge the impact of related project activities still at an early stage of implementation. Likewise, new Erasmus+ actions and strategies taken to increase **inclusion** and participation in the programme have been developed very recently. The new definitions and the development of national action plans for inclusion are certainly useful in principle, but their real impact remains to be seen.

The **European Universities Initiative** has been implemented in the Erasmus+ programme as a new action with high political ambitions and many associated goals.

There is a considerable risk of overloading the university alliances with policy demands. Too many demands at the same time and the pressure to maintain high standards on all fronts can make it challenging for consortia to develop their individual academic vision and profile and become truly innovative.

The project-based logic of the Erasmus+ programme represents a challenge for alliances that are expected to have a long-term vision. In this regard, the extension of the funding period under the 2021/22 call from three to four years was a positive development. The mobility dynamics of alliances reveal another necessary change, as the operational logic of sending and receiving institutions typically employed in Erasmus+ mobility does not fit.

Furthermore, it is highly welcome that higher education institutions from partner countries can participate in the action as associated partners. This acknowledges the fact that also within the alliances, European higher education cooperation goes beyond the EU. [EUA has advocated for this from the outset of the European Universities Initiative](#), aware that the ability to connect globally is one of the core assets of the Erasmus+ programme.

While the interest of the higher education sector in the European Universities Initiative continues, it is important to ensure that the initiative is balanced with other higher education actions in the programme, to ensure funding and parity of esteem for diverse methods of interuniversity cooperation.

The Erasmus+ programme responded swiftly to changing student and project needs due to the Russian invasion of **Ukraine**, demonstrating flexibility and adaptability. But a solution has yet to be found for students who require more than two semesters (the maximum funding duration under the mobility action) in order to finish their degree. This showcases once more that none of the existing Erasmus+ action lines are fit to cope with such emergencies. As pointed out by EUA and many other organisations, among them the European Students' Union, and supported by many policy makers: Europe lacks a programme to accommodate at-risk students and academics.

Thus far, only some of the [recommendations made by EUA](#) for the 2016 Erasmus+ mid-term review have been addressed with the current programme. For instance, EUA underlined the need for continuous and enhanced **consultation of participants** to further develop the programme. Unfortunately, to date there have been limited opportunities for participants to have their say, and the current call for evidence was issued at very short notice, during the summer and with little dissemination. EUA looks forward to providing much more detailed feedback in the Erasmus+ public and targeted consultations, which will be based on an in-depth survey of our membership on the topic.

*The European University Association (EUA) represents more than 850 universities and national rectors' conferences in 49 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Through continuous interaction with a range of other European and international organisations, EUA ensures that the independent voice of European universities is heard. For questions or comments on EUA's work on Erasmus+, please contact [Michael.Gaebel@eua.eu](mailto:Michael.Gaebel@eua.eu) and [Henriette.Stoeber@eua.eu](mailto:Henriette.Stoeber@eua.eu) at EUA's Higher Education Policy Unit.*