

YERUN POSITION ON THE INTERIM EVALUATION OF ERASMUS+

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Introduction & general views on Erasmus+

As an active European stakeholder in higher education, YERUN has participated in the **interim evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme** via the dedicated survey opened from 15 September until 8 December. The present feedback has been collected via the YERUN group on Erasmus+, which brings together colleagues involved in Key Action 1 (KA1), as well as via exchanges held with colleagues involved in Key Action 2 (KA2) projects (some of which YERUN has also participated in, either as a full partner or as an associated partner).[1]

Overall, Erasmus+ continues to be greatly appreciated by the YERUN members as a crucial instrument to promote **European integration** and as an enabling tool for **collaboration in higher education** across Europe, contributing to support entire generations of students to learn across Europe while developing a strong European identity. The new programme is praised for its important horizontal priorities, namely for its contribution to **inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, sustainability, and participation in democratic life, common values, and civic engagement**.

While co-existing with other schemes at European, national and/or regional level, Erasmus+ is in many cases the main source of funding for universities to promote learning mobility, and to foster cooperation, quality, inclusion and equity, excellence, creativity, and innovation at the level of organisations and policies.

Against this important, positive background, this paper aims to complement the feedback provided in the survey by highlighting some specific aspects that YERUN members find particularly relevant, in the hope that they can be addressed by the governing bodies in the remaining part of the programme and in its future successor.


The main focus is on practical aspects relating to the programme's implementation, by explaining why the **translation of its ambitions into the reality** on the ground at the universities has so far been challenging especially for colleagues involved in KA1. This way we aim to contribute to the collective understanding of how to overcome such challenges in the further implementation of Erasmus+, so that the programme can reach its full effectiveness.

These challenges sit on a rather **'operational' level**, and have also been extensively illustrated by relevant actors and stakeholders, such as the **European Parliament**, the **Erasmus Student Network**, and the **EUA**. YERUN would therefore like to hereby delve into the challenges that resonate the most with its members, based on the experiences reported since the launch of the new programme.

Delving into the challenges experienced in Key Action 1

Since its launch in 2021, Erasmus+ has established itself as a very ambitious programme, aiming to address many new objectives, and introducing important novelties compared to its predecessor (in terms of new formats, inclusion opportunities, digitalisation, etc.).

[1] See projects: [Link EDU-RES](#), [BUDS](#), [EDUSC](#), [BLA](#), [ProcToGo](#).




YERUN members are very much supportive of such goals and novelties, which indeed, if properly supported, are key in making the new programme more inclusive, more sustainable, and more innovative. However, especially when it comes to the implementation of Key Action 1, feedback is that the **transition between the two programmes has been far from gradual, has not been accompanied by a thorough support** or guidance (at European and/or national level), and has **not properly considered the resources needed** for the implementation of the novelties introduced.

As a consequence, the new programme is perceived as rather ambitious and complex, with many options that are difficult to navigate and implement. The guidelines provided thus far are considered as too vague and generic, with National Agencies (NAs) interpreting them differently, which often results in different applications of the rules across participating countries. Furthermore, the faulty workability of the IT tools meant to support the digitalisation of the programme (Beneficiary Module and Erasmus Without Paper dashboard) adds an important layer of complexity. All this is coming at the expenses of an excessive amount of work and pressure for all staff involved, sometimes to an extent where the funding received might not outweigh the burden needed for its administration and therefore collaboration opportunities must be given up. In particular:

1. The ambitious novelties introduced by Erasmus+ do not match the (often) limited resources available at the universities for their implementation. The increased administrative requirements that characterise the current programme can often constitute an obstacle for its implementation, especially in smaller organisations with fewer resources. This is often a deterrent to apply for projects because there is simply not enough time and resources to prepare applications. This can also constitute an obstacle to inclusivity, to the diversification of beneficiaries and to the participation of newcomers. Part of the increased administrative burden is a consequence of the non-workability of the IT tools (next point).

2. The digitalisation process has been problematic since the beginning. Especially at the start of the programme, IT tools were not working properly, with the Beneficiary Module and the Dashboard continuing not to be user-friendly (although they are slowly improving). This has created quite a scattered situation, whereby some universities are connected to the Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) Dashboard, while others are continuing to use their in-house reporting systems or rely on external providers. All of these parallel platforms, however, do not (yet) communicate well with each other, which results in extra administration, in an excessive number of email exchanges happening on a daily basis between partners, as well as between institutions and participants. In sum, this is causing important delays in the implementation of the EWP processes and requirements. In particular:

- **2a.** With the end of the project 2021 approaching, **the beneficiary module is still not functioning properly**; therefore, universities cannot rely on it and have not yet been able to use it as a monitoring tool (e.g. to ensure that the grants have been correctly allocated). With funding rules being so new and complicated, having a reporting and monitoring tool working from the start would have greatly helped colleagues in the administration of the budget.
- **2b. Erasmus Without Paper:** the main problem here is that the dashboard is not interacting well with the different systems operated by many universities, which makes the implementation of EWP very stressful, time-consuming, and slow, although colleagues acknowledge a general improvement over the last year.



3. Digitalisation is not only about technical aspects, but it has concrete repercussions on the mobility management process at universities. The conceptualisation of the digitalisation of Erasmus through EWP has been incorrect from the start: the digitalisation that emanates from EWP represents a change in the mobility management processes that have been carried out until now. Given that universities are moving from a document management of the mobility to a data management of the mobility, this involves not only technical changes, but also organisational and structural changes within universities. This, coupled with the technical problems mentioned above and with the additional crises caused by the pandemic, has generated many difficulties in the development and implementation of the imperative mandate of digitalisation of Erasmus+ process, which continue to this day, especially in those universities that handle a large number of mobilities, where the most difficulties are being encountered.

4. The new funding rules that universities need to apply to calculate the use of their funds are highly complex, not always sufficiently clear and tend to be interpreted by the NAs differently. The new programme introduced many options to define the final grant that students can get, depending on whether their travel can be considered green, whether they need extra days of travels, or whether they belong to disadvantaged categories, etc.

- **4a. Calculations need to be done on a case-by-case basis** by the E+ offices either manually or through their in-house systems (both of which are quite complex), and this introduces yet another administrative level. The more complex the calculations, the higher the risk of incurring into mistakes, and this risk will continue to be there until the Beneficiary Module will be fully working.

5. Different applications of the grant span by the NAs create an uneven playing field for participants going to the same destination. The baseline grant that NAs opt for within the spans allowed by the European Commission is sometimes very different from country to country: this results in final grants for participants going to the same destination being sometimes very different according to where the student is from.[2] The level of transparency for students in terms of their relevant grant rates is therefore also impeded.

6. The green top-up is highly symbolic and, as such does not suffice to cover the actual costs that green mobility actually entails. While its introduction is a welcome step forward, its real impact is questioned. Increasing the top-up to a more realistic sum would encourage more participants to opt for a more sustainable transport mode without having to lose out from their own pockets.

- **6a. Furthermore, the focus on green travel is perceived as limiting for countries that cannot implement it because of their geographical location:** greening is not just about travel choices, therefore its definition should be broadened to accommodate other contributions to sustainability that are put in place to counterbalance the sometimes inevitable CO₂ emissions.[3]

7. Budget is not always enough to cover the full mobility: despite the much welcome programme's budget increase and the introduction of top-up options, grants are still most of the time insufficient to cover all the mobility-related costs (despite students receiving a

[2] For instance, the basic band for an Irish student going to Spain is 300 euros, while the basic band for a German student going to the same destination is 540 euros.

[3] For instance, the University of Cyprus plants a tree every semester to compensate for the CO₂ emitted by their outgoing and incoming students and staff.

higher budget now compared to the previous programme). As a consequence, it might happen that:

- Less students are funded the whole duration of their mobility, or
- All students are funded, but for a shorter duration of the mobility.

This can constitute a deterrent for students to apply to the programme overall and might negatively impact the attractiveness of the programme. Furthermore, when it comes to short-term mobilities (such as BIPs) the lack of a travel grant for all students often constitutes an obstacle for a wider participation.

8. A specific point should be dedicated to the topic of the European Universities Alliances: this flagship initiative has revolutionised the panorama of cooperation in higher education in Europe and is pushing the boundaries of current frameworks and of the programme overall. By now it is clear that the Alliances are more than a normal Erasmus+ project and should therefore be equipped with a dedicated mechanism that would allow them to experiment with a longer term perspective. At the same time, it is crucial that this does not come at the expenses of KA1 funding: if funding continues being directed from KA1 to the alliances, this will contribute to impoverishing, instead of enriching, the panorama of cooperation across Europe, and therefore be counterproductive towards the programme's overall objectives.

In light of the above-mentioned challenges and aspects for consideration, there is the risk that while the programme aims to be more inclusive, it might actually go in the opposite direction: those institutions with a lot of capacity can implement all these new programme lines but others have to choose which lines they can continue working on.

Wishes for the future and conclusions.

YERUN continues to be a great supporter of Erasmus+ and welcomes the steps taken since its launch towards greater inclusion and sustainability. The recommendations presented below, therefore, focus specifically on what can, and in our view, should be done to enhance the programme towards the achievement of its inherent objectives.

In the short-medium term:

1. Improve the workability of the IT tools (Beneficiary Module and EWP dashboard) and increase their interoperability: solving the bugs currently hindering a full and smooth use of the platforms would release staff from much of the administrative burdens and stress that they have to deal with on a daily basis and solve many of the issues explained previously.

- A stronger interoperability would allow for the automatisation of many tasks that now have to be done manually; for instance, those who wish could have any "person-related" documents issued directly from the dashboard.
- New features could be explored to release staff from having to constantly exchange emails with students, for instance by allowing students to see their process in real-time and in a more transparent way.

2. Avoid frequent changes in grant agreement templates: every single change in the document requires considerable administrative burdens; often even a tiny change requires the intervention of the IT team. Avoiding these frequent changes, or simply allowing for a multiannual grant agreement template would solve this issue.

3. Foster better coordination and alignment among National Agencies and, where applicable, among universities: exploring a more streamlined system where beneficiaries can have a full overview of how NAs apply the guidelines would be welcome (e.g. through an online platform/repository where beneficiaries can also ask questions, exchange information, etc). This is much needed, to allow for greater transparency and for more clarity in the interpretation of the rules across the participating countries, in particular concerning:

- Definition of 'fewer opportunities': this would ease the work of international offices and would lead to more transparency for students and staff.
- Definition of travel rules.
- Sharing of information of basic funding pots for outgoing students.

4. Provide more support to Micro-credentials: Erasmus+ could foster its objective of inclusion and diversity through the use Micro-credentials and more attention could be given in the future to this topic. In particular, Micro-credentials could contribute to give more relevance and visibility to Blended Intensive Programmes and other short learning initiatives.


5. Allow for more flexibility in the use of funding within KA1: the possibility to transfer funding more easily within the same key action would allow pots of fund that might remain unspent for numerous reasons to be redirected to other activities instead of having to be given back.

In the long-term (successor of Erasmus+)

6. Increase the budget: a budget increase would definitely allow to solve many of the challenges mentioned in this paper. For example: increase the green top-up, thereby encouraging more beneficiaries to opt for more sustainable travel modes; introduce travel grants for all participants in short-term mobilities; allow students to get funding for the whole duration of their mobility; fund more students in general. An increase of the Organisational Support budget would also allow institution to increase their staff capacity to support in the mobility management. It would also allow for the European Universities Alliances to develop in line with their strategic objectives without participating institutions having to compromise on other partnerships.

7. Keep the current structure: for the future successor of Erasmus+, it would be better not to change drastically the structure of the programme again, so as to allow for the further absorption of the novelties introduced by the current programme. The objectives and the structure of the programme are not a problem, so the focus in the future should be put on how to simplify the management process for a smoother implementation at the institutional level.

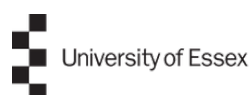
8. Anticipate the new programme well in advance, in order to allow a gradual absorption of potential changes. Incidentally, it will be important to ensure that funding remains constant between the end of this funding period and the beginning of the next one, so as to avoid disruptions on institutions and students. If this is not possible, a gradual introduction of the novelties would be welcome as opposed to having all novelties introduced at once without ensuring first a full workability of the supporting tools and guidelines.



9. Enable European Universities Alliances to reach their long-term objectives by going beyond the project-logic and adopting a long-term funding approach. Alliances are not performing as a simple EU project but are a much bigger endeavour which entails deep structural changes while operating in different national contexts. The project structure impoverishes the level of ambition, adjustment, and innovation of the activities of the initiative. As such, it is crucial that in the future, the initiative goes beyond the project-logic, adapts to a more innovative structure, and adopts a longer-term perspective.

In line with the above recommendations, YERUN members highlight their strong commitment in the continued implementation of the Erasmus+ programme and their openness in joining forces with the European Commission and the National Agencies to make it a success for everyone involved in its implementation.

- YERUN Members -



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