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# UNICA Position Paper on the Future of Erasmus+: Addressing Concerns and Proposing Solutions

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*This policy paper outlines key recommendations from the International Relations Offices (IROs) on thematic priorities within the Erasmus+ program. Focused on accreditation, eligibility, funding, and digitalization, the paper envisions a transparent, uniform, and efficient future for Erasmus+. Emphasizing collaboration and innovation, the IROs seek to address challenges and adapt to the evolving landscape of European Higher Education.*

## Introduction

In response to the evolving landscape of international education and the pivotal role played by the Erasmus+ program, the International Relations Officers (IROs) of UNICA convened at the annual UNICA International Relations Officers group meeting at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, 6-8 November 2023. The gathering provided a platform for comprehensive discussions on the future of Erasmus+, fueled by insights from key contributors such as Vito Borrelli, Team Leader of the Erasmus+ program at DG EAC. The meeting also featured valuable contributions, including the presentation of conclusions by Ibrahim Yorgun, Director of the International Co-operations Office at METU, regarding UNICA's participation in the KA131 Higher Education Working Group.

The discussions held during the meeting underscored the critical importance of Erasmus+ in both the European and international spheres. Building upon the wealth of perspectives shared during the event, this position paper seeks to articulate the UNICA IROs' stance on the future of Erasmus+, addressing concerns raised and proposing strategic solutions.

By integrating the perspectives of key stakeholders and aligning with contemporary trends, UNICA IROs aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding the future of Erasmus+. The proposed solutions are grounded in the principles of transparency, uniformity, and efficiency, with a commitment to fostering international collaboration and advancing education not just through the EU, but also on a global scale. Through this collective effort, UNICA IROs envision a future Erasmus+ program that not only addresses current challenges but also adapts to the dynamic needs of an ever-changing educational landscape.

## Erasmus+, a programme in constant evolution

**Vito Borrelli**, Team Leader of the Erasmus+ programme at DG EAC, delivered a keynote address highlighting the evolution of Erasmus+ from a simple university agreement to a pivotal force influencing political decisions and supporting millions in education. Borrelli emphasized Erasmus+ as a transformative agent, leaving **a lasting impact** on individuals, organizations, and EU policies. Despite global challenges, Erasmus+ remains committed to **learning mobility, competence promotion, well-being, and diversity**. The program's revolutionary spirit is evident in its international dimension, adaptation to market needs, and the groundbreaking European Universities initiative, with plans to establish 60 alliances by February 2024. Erasmus+'s impact extends beyond participant experiences, viewing **alumni as ambassadors shaping the program's narrative**. Borrelli highlighted the program's unwavering dedication to inclusion, positioning it as a powerful catalyst for positive societal transformation and a transformative force in European education.

## Looking ahead: UNICA contributing to the future Erasmus

**Ibrahim Yorgun** (Director of the International Co-operations Office, METU and UNICA representative in the KA131 Higher Education Working Group), reported back from the meetings of the KA131 Higher Education Working Group. This is a group that was created by the European Commission with the goal of enhancing the effective execution of future higher education Erasmus+ initiatives funded by internal policy funds (KA131). In preparation to one of the two group's meetings that already took place, a survey was carried out among the members of the UNICA IRO group to collect their views and expectations on the future of the programme. The survey was organised in the same thematic areas that guide the work of the KA131 Working Group:

1. **Accreditation System**
2. **Eligibility Rules**
3. **Funding system**
4. **Digitalisation/future of ESCI**

The survey responses revealed disparities in university needs and varying levels of readiness to adopt recent program innovations, leading to divided opinions on the necessity of implementing changes to current systems. For instance, opinions were nearly evenly split on maintaining the current ECHE accreditation system centralized by the European Commission versus adopting a new system where National Agencies oversee the entire process. Similarly, there is a lack of consensus on the funding calculation model for long-term student mobilities, with differing preferences for payment approaches and contrasting views on the complexity of explaining the concept of all months having 30 days.

Nonetheless, there are a few common remarks worth noting:

- **Better coordination:** a few examples include the need to better the alignment with European Alliances, unified requirement across countries when planning Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs);
- **Work overload & need for simplification:** too many 'novelties' at the start of a new programme make it too hard to handle and often result in overloading the administrative staff. Consensus leaned towards systems that are fair, transparent, and aligned with the practical realities of mobility and avoiding complications in scholarship payment administration;
- **'Neighbouring burden':** processes related to Erasmus+ require a great extent of internal work that impact personnel not directly involved in international offices. Communication gaps between IT and Erasmus+ offices remain a challenge;
- **More flexibility:** there is a demand for flexibility in several aspects, including different standards in accreditation processes, less rigidity in the allocation of the granted budget (in case of surplus, not stretching the project duration, but redistribute surpluses and deficits nationally without negative consequences for future calls/applications), less strictness of deadlines, flexibility in participant numbers;
- **Less overregulation:** there should be some relaxation of audit reliance on hard copies for practical digitalization, excessive control of learning agreements;

- **Stabilization of EU tools & alignment of expectations:** partners agree that stable EU tools would reduce staff time spent, though still requiring extra financial and time support for adjusting Student Information Systems for EWP, for example. Some raised concerns about the conceptualization of EWP, noting it as a data exchange process rather than a simple digitalization, requiring internal analysis and understanding of impending changes at both institutional and governmental levels.
- **Lack of clarity/ knowledge about support tools:** when asked about improvements that could be implemented by the EC to improve the current organisation of mobility, partners seemed to point out a few things that are already in place, denoting a need to connect them to those solutions. For instance, one of the most voted solutions was the creation of a comprehensive digital hub that consolidates information, resources, and updates for all mobility programs. This is something that is being address in the case of EWP, through the User Guides and the EWP User Group

## International Relations Officers Recommendations

In response to key presentations and their practical experiences with Erasmus+, the UNICA International Relations Officers (IROs) distill strategic recommendations addressing concerns in accreditation, eligibility, funding, and digitalization. Informed by their collective expertise, these recommendations aim to enhance transparency, uniformity, and efficiency within the Erasmus+ framework, contributing to a more inclusive and impactful future.

### Thematic Priorities:

#### 1. Accreditation System:

*Position:* UNICA IROs emphasize the critical need for a standardized and transparent accreditation system within the Erasmus+ program.

*Reasoning and Evidence:* The lack of consistent guidelines and processes for accreditation has led to confusion and inefficiencies. Streamlining accreditation requirements will enhance the credibility of the program and ensure that participating institutions meet high-quality standards.

*Recommendations:*

- a. Establish a centralized accreditation body with clear criteria.
- b. Develop comprehensive guidelines for the accreditation of institutions.
- c. Regularly update and communicate accreditation standards.

#### 2. Eligibility Rules:

*Position:* UNICA IROs advocate for clear and uniform eligibility rules to ensure equal opportunities for all participating entities.

*Reasoning and Evidence:* Inconsistencies in eligibility criteria hinder inclusivity and fairness. A standardized approach will promote equal access and foster collaboration among diverse institutions.

*Recommendations:*

- a. Create a unified eligibility framework applicable to all Erasmus+ initiatives.
- b. Ensure transparency in communicating eligibility criteria.
- c. Periodically review and update eligibility rules to adapt to evolving needs.

### **3. Funding System - Mobility:**

*Position:* UNICA IROs highlight the necessity for a fair and efficient funding system for mobility projects.

*Reasoning and Evidence:* Concerns raised during the meeting underscored disparities in funding allocation, hindering the realization of Erasmus+'s full potential. A transparent and equitable funding system will encourage broader participation and impactful mobility initiatives.

*Recommendations:*

- a. Develop a standardized funding allocation formula.
- b. Prioritize projects with clear objectives and expected outcomes.
- c. Establish a review mechanism for ongoing assessment and adjustment.

### **4. Digitalization/Future of the European Student Card Initiative:**

*Position:* UNICA IROs support the integration of digitalization and endorse the evolution of the European Student Card Initiative.

*Reasoning and Evidence:* The digitalization of processes and the advancement of the European Student Card Initiative align with contemporary trends and enhance accessibility for participants. Embracing technological solutions will streamline administrative processes and improve user experience.

*Recommendations:*

- a. Invest in robust digital infrastructure for seamless program administration.
- b. Collaborate with stakeholders to enhance the European Student Card Initiative.
- c. Provide training and resources to ensure the successful integration of digital tools.

## **Conclusions**

UNICA IROs' position on thematic priorities—accreditation system, eligibility rules, funding system for mobility, and digitalization—articulates a vision for a future Erasmus+ program characterized by transparency, uniformity, and efficiency. The proposed recommendations seek to address existing challenges and ensure the program's continued success in fostering international collaboration and education.

In essence, this position paper serves as a testament to the commitment of UNICA and its member institutions to actively contribute to shaping the future of Erasmus+. By leveraging collective expertise, embracing innovation, and advocating for meaningful changes, UNICA IROs envision a strengthened Erasmus+ program that not only meets current challenges but also adapts to the dynamic landscape of global education.

The UNICA IRO Group expresses its commitment to collaboration and cooperation with the European Commission (EC) in realizing the proposed recommendations. The IRO group looks forward to engaging in constructive dialogue and working closely with the EC to implement these changes for the advancement of the Erasmus+ program.