



Inclusion in International Higher Education: European Perspectives & Insights

#ACATHINKS

APRIL 2021

Bridging the structural gaps
in supporting inclusive mobility



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“To increase the qualitative impact of its actions and ensure equal opportunities, the Programme will reach out more and better to people of different ages and from diverse cultural, social and economic backgrounds” stipulates the Erasmus+ 2021 Programme Guide (p. 4).

The new Erasmus+ Programme (2021-2027) – which provides a framework for the higher education institutional work in Europe in advancing inclusion in internationalisation, and particularly inclusive mobility – addresses the importance of widening access and participation to mirror the complexity and diversity of the wider society. Inclusion, as one of the four horizontal priorities, is an underlying principle that informs all aspects of the programme, offering higher education institutions (HEIs) a variety of instruments to engage with an increasingly diverse student community.

The new Erasmus+ Programme strives to “reach out more and better” – an admirable, though quite vague, message taken from the Programme Guide 2021 and used as an introduction to this article. Preparing for the reality of an inclusive, diverse European Higher Education Area (EHEA), we are confronted with the realisation that with the current specialised and often segregated organisational structure within the HEIs, we might not be able to reach the goals we have set for ourselves within the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE). It seems odd: working for the internationalisation of students and staff, one of the core strengths of the international relations offices (IRO) is the creation and furthering of international networks of knowledge and competence, in close cooperation and exchange with partner institutions all over the world. In comparison, we seem to struggle more with establishing and strengthening the link to colleagues within our own institution. We will have to bridge that gap if we want to create cooperative internal networks of competence and support for inclusive mobility (and internationalisation more broadly).



In the first article of the ACA Think Pieces 2021, John Delap and Irina Ferencz referred to one of the main issues HEIs will have to address to ensure inclusive international mobility for all (potential) participants: the reality of existing institutional and competence silos that lead to parallel and sometimes contradictory processes and communication within HEI administration. This creates unnecessary barriers for participants as well as for responsible staff. To ensure that inclusion and diversity strategies will be translated into reality, we will need to reconsider existing structures, roles and responsibilities.

To me, preparing the application for the new ECHE proved to be an important step, not only to gain a better understanding of the programme itself, but also to gain insights into my institution's internal structures relating to inclusion and diversity. HEI inclusion and diversity strategies ensure an infrastructure that can comprise a number of responsible contact points for students and staff (part of the stakeholder group): disability officers, diversity officers, equal access/equal opportunity offices, and antidiscrimination offices, family and career officers, to name a few. The diversity of organisational units mirrors the diversity of target groups.

The list of relevant internal stakeholders per institution is long, and the involvement of external stakeholders can be an additional asset to improve the level of participation and the institutional impact of the Erasmus+ opportunities. At the same time, the responsibility for coordinating and administrating inclusive mobility activities will remain with the IRO. Depending on the institution, the IRO itself can be a complex entity, while in other cases the IRO equals one international officer with an overall responsibility. This will affect the management of the mobility sector within the HEI as well. While it is important for all types of HEIs that are committed to make mobility more inclusive for its related services to collaborate (under the coordinating role of the IRO), it is particularly for smaller-sized IROs that this collaboration is essential.

In April 2021, we are at a turning point in the policy and programme framework in Europe, with the transition between the previous and the current generation of the Erasmus+ Programme. This comes with a diversification of the underrepresented target groups that should be supported in their participation in mobility opportunities funded by the programme. Understanding this shift is important, as it has structural consequences for the further support of inclusive mobility at institutional level, pointing to additional gaps that need to be bridged.

TRANSITIONING FROM MOBILITY WITH SPECIAL NEEDS (2014-2020) TO WITH FEWER OPPORTUNITIES (2021-2027) AND STRUCTURAL IMPLICATIONS

In the *previous Erasmus+ Programme (2014-2020)* additional financial support was offered to participants with *special needs* (this included participants with disabilities, as well as chronic illness/health issues) and for *students from disadvantaged backgrounds*. In Germany, this also covered students with child/ren. Support for the participation of these target groups in mobility opportunities at institutional level differed between *outgoing* and *incoming mobility* (of the target groups).

At institutional level, access to the social top-up for the outgoing mobility of participants with disabilities and to the additional funding opportunities is usually coordinated at the central level, by the IRO staff responsible for the Erasmus+ Programme. Once participants have successfully entered the programme, the mobility management for *outgoing students* is centred on the administrative and financial aspect of the individual mobility.

For the administration of *outgoing mobility*, the sector-specific knowledge of the IRO is the core prerequisite for the project management. It is therefore possibly not surprising that even the successful mobility experience of individual participants with special needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds does not necessarily lead to a long-term alliance of IRO and Disability Offices or family services. For dissemination purposes, cooperation with disability and/or inclusion offices or other relevant organisational units can further the outreach of the programme, for example by using the target-group specific communication channels. This potential, however, is often not utilised in a structured manner to increase the impact of the programme. Overall, the IRO and other organisational units of the institution tend to remain separate, even while dealing with the same target groups and with similar issues.

In contrast, the support of *incoming participants* with special needs or from a disadvantaged background presents us with a different experience. Much more involvement by a multitude of stakeholders is required in the preparation and support of the individual mobility. The primary contact point tends to remain the IRO; however, faculty, student and accommodation services as well as inclusion and/or disability offices or family services have to be involved actively in the different phases of mobility. To a large extent, the support of outgoing mobilities is purely administrative. Incoming students, on the other hand, will require organisational, social and academic support to ensure the quality of the mobility experience. The details of the process will of course depend on the specific needs of each individual candidate. The joint effort, though often very intense during the individual mobility, does not



usually lead to continued cooperation and a pool of shared knowledge. Again, as in the administration of outgoing student mobility with special needs, we experience a circular process, and often do not achieve sustainable communication – and support structures.

The **current generation of the Erasmus+ Programme (2021-2027)** comes with a broader approach to the identification of target groups for making mobility more inclusive, jointly labelled as *participants with fewer opportunities*. In the language of the 2021 Programme Guide (p. 59), “a person with fewer opportunities is a potential participant whose personal, physical, mental or health-related conditions is such that his/her participation in the project / mobility action would not be possible without extra financial or other support.”

Rather than fully identifying the target groups, the 2021 Programme Guide lists the multiple barriers that hinder equal participation, underlining that the list “is not exhaustive and is meant to provide a reference in taking action” (p. 7) and that participants can be hindered by several of these barriers concomitantly. The major categories of barriers include: disabilities; health problems; barriers linked to education and training systems; cultural differences; social barriers; economic barriers; barriers linked to discrimination; and geographical barriers. This translates into a much broader ground that needs to be covered by institutional structures in the next seven years. The diversity of possible target groups and their respective needs will require an equally diverse set of approaches to establish successful communication and support procedures as part of the mobility management. The increasing complexity is daunting, and IRO staff might not always be best equipped for this task. At the same time, the mobility experts face the pressure of increasing demands, and often experience a perceived lack of support.

For the first Call in the new programme in 2021, the definition of *participants with fewer opportunities in higher education is focused on* “participants with physical, mental and health related conditions, students with children, students who work or are professional athletes and students from all study fields underrepresented in mobility.” (p. 43) This appears to be a relatively clear-cut, though limited portfolio, and we have to consider the relevance for our institution to identify possible scenarios. Given the broadening of focus from the previous to the current programme, HEIs might be better equipped and experienced to cooperate internally in supporting the participation on some of these target groups, over others:

- For *participants with physical, mental and health-related conditions* (i.e., the group of participants with special needs of the previous Erasmus+ Programme), there may already be at institutional level existing structures and a pool of expertise, based on previous experience. Ideally, one can refer to the Disability/Inclusion Offices for relevant support. There may already be knowledge and a network of experts supporting (incoming) students with fewer opportunities, and contact with different stakeholders established.
- *Students with child/ren* have been part of the Erasmus+ inclusion strategy previously as well. For the expert knowledge as well as outreach, the Family Service will be the most relevant cooperation partner.
- *Students who work or are professional athletes*. For this group, possible cooperation partners can be Student Committees and Student Unions, as well as the Career Service. However, almost 70% of students at German HEIs work part-time, and access to additional data to confirm economical needs and barriers are not easily available.
- *Students from all study fields underrepresented in mobility*. Targeting the underrepresented study fields in the context of inclusion will address a number of structural and academic challenges and require the support and specialised knowledge of the faculty staff, as well as targeted partnership management. For dissemination, this group of potential participants is included in regular communication strategies on mobility opportunities distributed by the IRO, as well as by the faculties. Focused communication will rely on close cooperation with faculty staff.

In trying to reach these *potential participants*, one of the key parameters in the development of an inclusive mobility programme will be effective dissemination/communication. One of the barriers to international mobility is, based on data from student surveys, access to [relevant] information on the programme opportunities. In view of this diverse group of *potential participants*, we will require new, target-specific communication strategies. It will not suffice simply to publish the programme information. Within the IRO, general information is available, but it will likely need specialised knowledge for it to be ‘translated’ into messages that resonate with the multiple target groups. It is essential that knowledge is spread evenly, that colleagues and student groups are actively involved to ensure equal access to information and participation.

In all cases, the IRO will remain the central stakeholder in the coordination of the process.



HOW TO GET STARTED IN BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN EXISTING INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

Given the diversification of target groups to be further supported in making mobility more inclusive, *what will be required to trigger inclusive mobility structures within HEIs and who should enact the change process?* Given the existing expertise of the IRO in promoting mobility opportunities and in supporting both outgoing and incoming students, it seems reasonable to expect that the initiative will come from the IROs (the mobility experts), inviting relevant stakeholders to co-create widened participation opportunities for the institution. Ideally, this would develop into a joint effort and cover the following potential steps:

1. Stakeholders have to be identified and roles and responsibilities clearly defined.
2. A pool of knowledge and expertise meeting the specific requirements of the diverse target groups (and individual participants) needs to be established.
3. The mobility management has to be adapted and translated to be accessible to all relevant stakeholders.
4. The target groups within the HEI need to be identified and successful communication strategies established, involving relevant stakeholders per target group (as experts, translators and mediators).

To pave the way for this structural process and broader cooperation between important stakeholders, the following extract from the questionnaire prepared by the German Erasmus+ Experts' Working Group on Inclusion could be helpful to self-assess an institution's readiness for the ECHE standards on the inclusion priority:

- *Are inclusion and diversity part of my institution's strategy?*
- *What target groups can be identified/prioritised?*
- *Which mobility barriers are given by (mobile/non-mobile) students?*
- *Who are the stakeholders at my institution (for students/staff)?*
- *What communication strategy is used*
 - *within my institution*
 - *to reach the target groups*
- *and what channels can be used for promotion/dissemination per target group?*
- *What structures (support; administration) are established? What is required, what is possible?*
- *Which elements of the Erasmus+ Programme (2021-2027) can be identified to promote/support inclusive mobility per target group?*

To succeed in the process of re-designing the administration of international mobility in an inclusive way, institutions need to rely not only on own adaptability and involvement of the IRO staff, but on the active engagement, cooperation and competences of the above identified stakeholders. Understanding competences as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, this has to go beyond the sheer transfer of knowledge to a fully-fledged transformative process. Institutions must sufficiently address the need for staff development, to ensure that the internationalisation and diversification of the student community is adequately paired with an increase in capacity and competences on structural level, for example by offering relevant training opportunities. Administrative staff, e.g., counsellors, coordinators etc, need to be prepared for the increasingly complex tasks, to be able to respond to the needs of the new target groups.

A bridge builder in this process is the currently evolving role of *Inclusion Officer*, seen as a mediator, facilitator, translator, overall a kind of interface between the different organisational units in HEIs involved in student – and/or inclusion – and diversity management: *"Inclusion officers can for example help raise awareness, define strategies for communication and outreach, ensure adequate support throughout mobility in cooperation with relevant colleagues and help facilitate cooperation between relevant staff within the institution with expertise in the field of inclusion and diversity."* (2021 Programme Guide, p. 43).



PROGRAMME OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER INSTITUTIONAL BRIDGE-BUILDING

The Erasmus+ Programme presents HEIs with many opportunities that can be tapped into for supporting inclusive mobility and the development of staff competences, by providing not only additional financial support for the participants with fewer opportunities, but also “other support,” promoting the development of potential activities that can cover all kinds of services, support structures, and resources that institutions can apply to ensure equal access.

For example, the Erasmus+ Staff Mobility for Training opportunities can be used to engage colleagues from relevant organisational units, e.g. the Disabilities Office, Inclusion Offices, or other administrative staff. This can work on different levels: by offering an international experience; the chance to learn more about the way other institutions are structured; by advertising learning opportunities to improve language competences; or by identifying specialised training opportunities on topics related to inclusive mobility. The new possibilities of virtual training further expands these options.

With the Erasmus+ Organisational Support grants, HEIs can finance additional promotional activities, as well as training and networking opportunities. By offering networking opportunities with visiting staff or students, HEIs can offer internationalisation at home experiences to colleagues on a wider scale.

Generally, the programme’s attention to inclusion can support institutional internal awareness-raising and institutional structural development. We can hope that with a more open, more flexible operative infrastructure our institutions can successfully address the diverse needs of our students in a truly inclusive environment.

Inclusion in International Higher Education: European Perspectives & Insights is a new “ACA Think Pieces” series launched in March 2021. Each contribution in this series will explore the multi-faceted nature of inclusion from a different international education perspective, including, for example: concrete advice regarding developing strategic inclusion plans for inclusive higher education mobility, how to measure progress on inclusion-related goals, practical examples of data collection to enhance diversity, synergies of excellent inclusion practices from the Erasmus+ youth sector relevant for higher education, etc. Articles will be authored by expert colleagues in internationalisation of higher education and inclusion, and will be published electronically on ACA’s website towards the end of each month from March until the end of 2021.