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Paul is responsible for (re)designing business processes aiming to reduce the administrative workload for student mobility as well as for supporting the correct implementation of ECTS principles.

In this capacity he was involved in the Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) initiative from the very start and even before EWP came into being he participated in the so-called 'heion' project (higher education institutions online for ECTS).

Paul took part in consecutive projects on Erasmus Without Paper and is currently task leader for Communication and Outreach in the Erasmus Without Paper+ tender contract. He is also leading the Business Process Owners Forum and the IRO-representation in the ESCI governance.

Digitalisation in International Higher Education

How digital Erasmus administration can contribute to more and better mobilities.

Digital Erasmus administration, in European policy terms referred to as the European Student Card Initiative, is a cornerstone of the [2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme](#) and aims to bring administration surrounding student mobility to the fingertips of participants, while at the same time releasing International Relations Officers from a part of their administrative burden.

This is the story of how the European Higher Education Community set out to digitalise the Erasmus mobility processes. Before we look at the road travelled, I would like to share a story from an Erasmus journey that took place about a decade ago that underlines the need for more administration harmonisation:

"I had a great time in Brest, the genuine Erasmus galore. I made friends, worked on improving a second language, and divided my time between school and life-experiences. However, when exams came around, I ran into a catch-22 situation between universities. The exams at the visiting university would take place after deliberation at my own university. Because my faculty did not know a way to fix it, they let me pick the courses to be recognized at my own university and I didn't need any report on what I did during my time abroad."
- Anonymous student

The fragmented administrative landscape of the Erasmus mobility process meant that students often ended up in weird situations like this. Colleagues dealing with Erasmus mobilities know how much time is involved in the administrative follow up of student exchanges. Against the background of new mobility opportunities (e.g., in the context of European University alliances or Blended Intensive Programmes) and growing numbers every year, this has become ever more difficult to manage in an efficient way – all at a time where students can plan their whole life on a smartphone (from managing finances to ordering every product imaginable). It is becoming clear that future Erasmus journeys will need to travel along a digital infrastructure if we want to safeguard the benefits of educational and cultural mobility.

In December 2012 a group of higher education professionals and IT specialists gathered in Brussels for a brainstorming session that received the working title "Erasmus without Paper". They were invited by Prof.

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Luciano Saso and Mr. Valère Meus. Prof. Luciano Saso was the Rector's Delegate for International Mobility at Sapienza University of Rome, and Mr. Valère Meus was an International Relations Expert at Ghent University and had previously discussed this idea of making Erasmus administration less cumbersome on several occasions, and finally decided to try to make it happen. At that time, the "founding fathers" of Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) could never have imagined that almost ten years later, digital transitions (including digitalisation of the Erasmus administration) would become one of the top priorities of the 2021–2027 Erasmus programme and would be featured as one of the four flagship areas to boost the European dimension in higher education and research ([European Strategy for Universities](#)).

Today, structural funding is made available for the digital future of the Erasmus administration. Stakeholders are now working closely together with the European Commission to realise this dream of straightforward and secure online administrative procedures. From the side of the HEIs, amongst other actions, it is expected that they connect with each other via the EWP network infrastructure and exchange mobility-related data, thereby facilitating administrative procedures by going digital. At the same time, HEIs can use the Erasmus+ App to guide their students throughout the mobility journey.

ERASMUS MOBILITY ADMINISTRATION: A CUMBERSOME PROCESS

Erasmus mobility for studies comes with quite a bit of administration. As a first step, an inter-institutional agreement needs to be in place. This agreement deals with study fields and numbers of students to be exchanged. They form the basis for the mobility spots for a given academic year. Once these numbers are settled, a round of applications takes place at the sending HEI, resulting in the sending HEI nominating students to the receiving HEI. Students then need to apply at the host (receiving) institution as well and they need to start preparing their learning agreement. Once the student arrives at the mobility destination, in many cases the learning agreement needs to undergo changes. And while many sending institutions expect an official confirmation of the arrival and departure of their students, all of them need a Transcript of Records issued by the host at the end of the exchange, in order to transfer the courses and grades so that they can be officially recognised as part of the educational curriculum. The scenario above did not yet take into account some additional administrative steps related to grant management, including Online Language Support, reporting of mobilities towards the National Agencies

and the processing of participant reports.

Although some efficiency gains could probably be achieved by critically evaluating the previously listed administrative steps, the vast majority of mobility administration is there for good reasons, e.g., geared towards guaranteeing the Erasmus grant or facilitating recognition of the activities and endeavours abroad. Simplifying the mobility processes by switching from a paper trail towards an online environment is thus in the interest of all parties involved in the mobility process.

From a student perspective

Cumbersome administrative processes hinder students to embark on a mobility journey. The iconic scenes from Auberge Espagnole where students are hunting for stamps and signatures on their mobility documents might be somewhat exaggerated, but the administrative burden that comes with an Erasmus exchange cannot be neglected.

The current generation of students are digital natives who use apps throughout the day, engage with information online and are used to dealing with administration in a digital manner. Why not embrace digitalisation and bring mobility administration to the fingertips of students? Digitalisation reveals new opportunities where students are guided throughout the process in a structured way and all relevant information can be made available with one click. The Erasmus+ App is the solution to become a one-stop-shop for learners, bringing all relevant information together under a button on their phone. In the future, more administrative steps will be carried out directly from this tool and students will be automatically redirected to systems in use at their universities connecting to the Erasmus+ App via third-party software or inhouse systems.

On the other hand, the student experience would benefit from institutions embracing the so-called "once-only-principle". In the context of student mobility, the "once-only principle" would mean that students only need to enter their mobility information once and that it will be shared in a safe and secure way directly between relevant services in the mobility administration. This would enable students to avoid sharing the same set of details over and over again. Instead, the info is reused and shared between systems from the sending and the receiving institutions throughout the mobility lifecycle, off course respecting data protection principles. For example, when a student applies at the sending university, they need to complete information about the mobility period, the field of education, motivation and share supporting documentation. Rather than



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requesting this information again via another application from the host university, the information itself (in the form of data) can be sent from the sending university to the host institution, thus the student does not have to enter the same info twice. A critical evaluation of data gathering at each of the stages of the mobility experience, keeping in mind this one-only-principle, could already reduce the administrative efforts for students extensively and Erasmus Without Paper is providing the foundations for such seamless exchange of information. Such steps should be underpinned by a sound authentication and identification mechanism where single-sign-on solutions not only make the life of the programme participants easier, but at the same time they unlock the potential for the automatic sharing of academic attributes, reinforcing this once-only-principle and the trustworthiness of the information.

From a HEI perspective

While the seamless mobility experience for students is the most important rationale to support digital mobility administration, there are certainly important benefits from the perspective of an International Relations Officer (IRO) as well. Many IROs are drowning in the current bureaucratic administrative steps that come with one simple mobility.

By needing to focus on the mere administrative side of things, oftentimes supporting the mobile students themselves is compromised. And while there are many motivated colleagues out there who go the extra mile to combine the best of both worlds, the administrative side of things could become less prominent, if digital processes were supported. This would allow IROs to devote more attention to the quality of mobilities, increasing efforts for supporting incoming and outgoing Erasmus students before, during and after their sojourn, while at the same time allowing them to focus more on specific target groups. Moreover, simplification of the administration could also lead to enhanced quality of internationalisation, as a whole, as well as broadening internationalisation to all students.

To work on quality enhancement, the data collected by digitalising administrative processes can provide useful insights. By interconnecting systems and exchanging information on a large scale, such data become available and can be used for defining indicators to monitor our quality and policies. On the other hand, this data can enable policy makers to make data-informed decisions.

Finally, automated mobility processes could also have a positive effect on the implementation of ECTS and its guidelines for mobility and credit recognition. Digitising

crucial ECTS documents, such as, the course catalogue, learning agreements and transcripts of records, paves the way for more transparency about the usage and correct application of such mobility documents to all parties involved: student, sending HEI, receiving HEI but also the National Agencies (NAs) and the European Commission. While some Erasmus Charter for Higher Education-holders may feel a certain level of discomfort due to increased monitoring opportunities, if in the end this leads to better recognition of mobility periods, it seems difficult to oppose such developments.

CONCLUSION

Erasmus Without Paper and the digitalisation of mobility administration focuses on digital transformation but it also puts people at its heart. The initiative is about connecting systems, but one should not forget about why we are doing this. The main aim of the initiative is to connect people. By simplifying the Erasmus administration and providing clear guidance and information in a few clicks, the accessibility of the programme will increase, leading to more students and learners choosing this life changing experience. At the same time HEIs will have more capacity to support the increased number of incoming and outgoing exchange students, as well as make the most out of new mobility opportunities, while they will also be able to invest more in the quality of the exchange experience itself.

The ambition and scale of this digitalisation effort is unprecedented in the field of higher education. Transforming the way almost 5.000 European institutions administer their student mobilities on a daily basis is a formidable challenge, in that it requires an entire community of diverse technical stakeholders and IROs to perform in close concert. In order to realise the dream of a seamless mobility experience, the collaborative mindset that is inherent to the sector of internationalisation is of vital importance. This goal will be achieved only if we work together, with each and every higher education institution in Europe contributing to the realisation of indeed an Erasmus Without Paper in the near future.

It is clear that the European Student Card Initiative does not yet reach the goals outlined in this Think Piece and that many colleagues struggle with making digital inter-institutional agreements and learning how these agreements work, often leading to an additional workload instead of reducing pressure on colleagues involved in the mobility process. But in the somewhat bumpy transition phase and transformation process, it is of utmost importance to remember why we are doing this and not lose sight of what we are working towards.



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This article is part of the "**ACA Think Pieces**" series on digitalisation, launched in March 2022. The contributions in this series explore the multi-faceted nature of digitalisation in higher education institutions from an international cooperation perspective. They take under consideration current challenges at various levels, local/national/regional and European higher education policies supporting digitalisation and practical examples of digitalisation infrastructures, effective support services for virtual and/or blended mobilities and development of intercultural competences in a digital environment etc. Articles are authored by expert colleagues on the digitalisation of HE field, and are published electronically on ACA's website, monthly, from March until the end of 2022.