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Towards a revised European learning mobility framework: ACA vision and way forward

ACA policy input



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for internationalisation of higher education

Introduction

As an association of national bodies facilitating international cooperation in higher education, research and service to society, ACA plays a key role in supporting the international experience of higher education students and staff. ACA members manage a wide range of European, national and regional mobility programmes and other international cooperation schemes, with long-standing expertise in the field.

One of the ambitious goals of the European Education Area (EEA) is to make learning periods abroad for everyone a norm rather than an exception, and the current revision of the European learning mobility framework supports this broader aim.

From ACA's perspective, the updated framework could offer a more comprehensive vision for mobility in the field of higher education, based on the lessons learnt from the pandemic, multiplication of mobility formats, latest technology advancements, and the evolving international context, whilst reinstating the overall value of mobility for society and linking various instruments that are already in place at different levels, enhancing synergies.

This ACA statement contributes to the co-revision of the framework by outlining several overarching principles to guide Europe's further work on mobility in the higher education field and bring forward several areas for action with regard to different types of mobility at the national and European level.

1. Overarching principles from a higher education perspective

Diversity and need for tailor-made solutions

Europe has one of the richest and most diverse mobility landscapes in the world, offering a broad variety of opportunities to students and higher education staff, including credit mobility exchanges for study or training, long-term degree mobility, mobility for teaching, training and research, and lately online as well as hybrid forms of mobility for different purposes. These exchanges have been enabled both by EU funded programmes such as Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe, but also by multiple national schemes and support initiatives.

Mirroring the diversity of both the student body and academic community in Europe, the **multitude and diversity of such mobility actions and approaches in the higher education field is a key asset** of the EEA, the European Research Area, and the European Higher Education Area, contributing to their richness and quality. This diversity should be further cherished and preserved.

Different types of mobility are subject to their own specific issues and trends, requiring a granular understanding of the unique motivations, challenges, barriers, and enablers that are specific to different contexts and groups of potentially mobile individuals, based on their personal circumstances. In view of the potentially tightening budgets, it is of utmost importance to **preserve the support for different mobility types at all levels**, taking into account the diversification of formats, and the diverse needs of students and staff, based on the lessons learnt during the pandemic. This continued, and with potentially heightened support is essential also in light of the inclusion, digitalisation and sustainability related objectives of mobility programmes, acknowledging the complex work of higher education institutions to reconcile and balance these objectives, and to develop comprehensive approaches that benefit all students.

Openness

Global openness and trust-based cooperation are one of the key features and major strengths of European higher education, as highlighted in [ACA's reflection paper on Europe's international higher education in times of uncertainty](#). As this principle goes hand-in-hand with institutional autonomy and academic freedom, higher education institutions in Europe should themselves decide on how to use student and staff mobility and international higher education more broadly to advance their missions, whilst being able to fall back on support to identify, assess and mitigate various risks.

Such openness should remain the guiding principle for mobility both within Europe and with outside world. Mobility opportunities offered in the European context particularly within the Erasmus+ programme should be both open to and inclusive of all countries, especially those in Europe. In this spirit, ACA members fully supported, in their [joint position paper on 11 June 2021](#), the Swiss association to both Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe in the period 2021-2027, which would strongly reinforce the excellence and impact dimension of student and staff mobility in Europe.

Flexibility

Recent lessons learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war in Ukraine, and other conflict, crisis, and emergency contexts around the world have demonstrated the **importance of flexible funding mechanisms for mobility that are adaptable and responsive to different kinds of volatilities**. Further flexibilisation of programme rules is necessary, particularly with regard to *force majeure* provisions based on revised risk assessment approaches to student and staff exchanges with countries exposed to extraordinary circumstances such as epidemiological issues, military conflicts, or natural disasters, including their practical implications for grant management at different levels. Several ACA members, such as the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI), the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HK-dir), and the Dutch Organisation for Internationalisation in Education (Nuffic) put in place national support structures and guidelines to address arising political uncertainties, as elaborated in [ACA's paper on the quest for sensible openness](#). More collaborative solutions should be further explored as part of the Team Europe approach.

These developments also raised a broader issue of whether the existing mobility programmes, particularly the Erasmus+ programme, are equipped to provide a continuing emergency response and if new dedicated schemes serving humanitarian purposes may be needed for the international higher education sector. The experience gained by ACA members from managing national support schemes for students at risk (e.g., DAAD's Hilde Domin programme, HK-dir's Students at Risk programme, NAWA's Solidarity programmes for Belarus and Ukraine) shows that such support measures can be flexible and effective within a dedicated framework and prepare the ground for targeted measures and further coordination at the European level.

2. Different mobility settings and support actions

Over the last years, significant progress has been made in promoting and facilitating mobility through advancements at the European and national level, particularly by refocusing the Erasmus+ programme on the key horizontal priorities, as well as embedding mobility into broader national strategies and connecting it to national development objectives.

Further actions can be implemented at the national and European level to build on these achievements by supporting four major types of mobility: credit mobility for study and for training, degree mobility, new mobility formats such as blended mobility, and staff mobility. The related trends and areas for action are presented in more detail below.

Credit mobility

Participation in short-term mobility, such as outgoing credit mobility within Europe or to the rest of the world, has been lately stagnating or even declining in some countries in Europe, such as Finland, Germany, Hungary, Slovenia, and Spain, despite sustained efforts at national and institutional level to revert these trends.

While there are pronounced differences across different fields of study and types of higher education institutions, this trend can be largely attributed to a range of socio-economic factors, such as a rising number of first-generation students into higher education or those who have to self-finance their education by working in parallel to their studies. The recent Covid-19 pandemic followed by the energy and inflation crises seem to have further aggravated the financial uncertainties and economic situations for many students as well as staff, risking undermining the affordability of short-term travel on existing conditions.

- **An immediate solution to address the worsening economic context would be to align grant rates for both student and staff mobility to the current economic realities at their destinations. Additional costs related to visa applications, health insurance or banking fees should be taken into account, particularly in the context of international outgoing and incoming credit mobility.**
- **Widening participation in mobility should not be achieved at the expense of sustainability goals. In this context, the awareness of green travel options among students and staff should be further raised at all levels, while supporting further exchange of good practice in different fora.**

Access to information about mobility opportunities is essential, but the message also needs to be properly tailored in order to resonate with the target audience.

- **It is necessary to showcase the value of short-term mobility for students' personal development and employability through different role models, and tailor the message to specific contexts, groups of potentially mobile individuals and their specific circumstances (and related obstacles) and different fields. Such benefits should also be highlighted to employers. Student networks are crucial partners in the entire communication process and should be empowered and supported in their capacity of information multipliers and reference points.**
- **Mobility for training/internships is essential for building links to local ecosystems, particularly companies and other types of employers and social partners, fostering both employability and service to society. Further**

cooperation models with the private sector should be explored and taken into account as part of the national and European social and economic development programmes and large-scale initiatives, such as the Recovery and Resilience plan.

Smooth management and administration of mobility programmes is important for beneficiaries (supporting successful grant implementation) and for efficient progress monitoring. The experience gained from the first years of the current Erasmus+ programme shows that operating with deficient IT tools and complex documentation creates a significant additional workload for mobility managers at higher education institutions. Time unnecessarily spent on coping with deficient IT tool diverts the beneficiaries' attention and limited resources from other, much more important tasks, such as offering more personalised counselling and support to mobile students as well as tailored communication on the existing mobility opportunities to students and staff, which is required in the context of widening participation. A negative experience in the IT administration of the programme risks affecting the reputation of the programme in the long run.

- **Further simplification in terms of administration as well as adequate IT and data collection tools available from the start of the programme are crucial both for the implementation of the programme and for impact assessment and future planning.**
- **Mobility targets and coherent data at the national and European level are important for progress monitoring. To this end, support for improving the data collection on credit mobility, as well as extending data collection to new mobility formats (e.g. blended mobility) should not only be continued, but further enhanced.**

Longer-term, structural solutions to address related barriers require further progress on various fronts, particularly deepening the enabling conditions for internationalisation. Possible actions can be implemented at the national level based on the good practice examples available in ACA members' countries:

- Use of performance-based funding tools for mobility and internationalisation (e.g., Portugal)
- Earmarked funding for less internationalised fields of study (e.g., for teacher training or professional education in [Germany](#) and Norway)
- Facilitating joint degree programmes and joint campuses (e.g., Belgium-Flanders, [Germany](#))
- Mainstreaming the use of mobility windows (e.g., Hungary)
- Building further capacity of HEIs and other stakeholders to work on inclusive, digital and green mobility (all ACA members' countries)
- Creating space for experimentation with different types of mobility (e.g., [Germany](#))
- Exploiting EU structural funds and other development funds for the purpose of mobility (e.g., Germany, Slovakia).

Degree mobility

Many countries in Europe link their degree mobility schemes and scholarship programmes to national development agendas, including the attraction and retention of international students in order to safeguard study programmes in specific areas of study that no longer attract enough domestic applicants, as well as to address demands for a qualified workforce.

For example, in the context of incoming degree mobility, DAAD has recently set the target of doubling the annual number of international higher education graduates entering the German labour market, rising to at least 50,000 by 2030. Similarly, under the Finnish Talent Boost programme, the goal is to triple the number of international students by 2030 and to have 75% of them stay and work in Finland after graduation, based on the collaboration of all national authorities and agencies with a role in the integration of international graduates in the country. Steering international graduates more actively towards the Dutch labour market while increasing their language skills has been one of the recent political objectives in the Netherlands.

Challenges facing this type of mobility are highly dependent on the national context and include the debates around the quality of studies and student success, tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students, housing and accommodation pressures, as well as immigration and labour market concerns.

One cross-cutting area for action includes further progress that needs to be achieved to implement the 2018 Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad.

- **It is important to further advance the automatic recognition of diplomas and studies abroad driven by trust-based approaches, as successfully implemented by some of the ACA members (HK-dir, Nuffic, Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR)) in the Nordic, Benelux and Baltic context, and to support information dissemination to higher education institutions and training for staff.**

Institutional partnerships such as Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters and other types of joint degree programmes, as well as European University alliances create conducive conditions for student and staff mobility, provide platforms for experimentation, and trigger reform at a system level.

- **It is important to continue supporting mobility through broader institutional cooperation frameworks and formats (from joint programmes to strategic partnerships and fully-institutional types of collaboration) (co-)funded at the national and European level, and to disseminate good practices across the sector.**

Further work on promoting Europe as an attractive study destination for international students is equally important for this type of mobility, as is continuously fostering peer learning and collaboration between the national agencies with a role in promoting study opportunities and in providing support to incoming degree-seeking students.

- **For this purpose, global approaches relying on common efforts and better coordination as Team Europe should be further elaborated, tested and**

mainstreamed. Good practice examples for further upscaling include the Study in Europe initiative based on national marketing platforms and campaigns.

- **Further improving stay rights and conditions for international graduates to search for employment in a host country is highly important for responding to the labour market and broader socio-economic development needs in Europe based on the progress achieved, also in line with the objectives set under the European Year of Skills.**
- **Establishing closer links to the labour market requires further experimentation with new tools such as micro-credentials as well as innovative teaching methods.**

New mobility formats

While the Covid-19 pandemic reconfirmed students' interest in physical mobility, new blended mobility formats have emerged as **complementary tools** that can be used to foster inclusion, offering more options for mobility to students for whom longer mobility periods might not be feasible, and strengthen the international orientation of higher education institutions, ensuring diverse experiences for all students.

Yet blended mobility can be associated with additional administrative work and coordination, and it is still a rather new concept for the majority of higher education institutions in Europe. There are also relevant challenges, related to disparities in national curricula, lack of flexibility and motivation, as well as limited support and communication among academics and management, and at times limited interest among (potential) international partners. On the other hand, blended intensive programmes offer low-threshold opportunities for HEIs to collaborate on joint curricula.

- **The ability to implement quality blended mobility activities, both from an academic and administrative perspective, should be further advanced at the national and European levels. This particularly involves further investments in adequate IT tools and support infrastructure, as well as training for academic staff and further professionalization of administrative staff on the topic at hand.**

Staff mobility

Staff mobility is highly impactful at different levels, being a prerequisite for the quality and relevance of higher education, while leading to other types of cooperation in education and research. However, this potential can be further utilized more strongly, through a more strategic approach.

Staff mobility plays an important role in increasing and supporting student mobility, as shown by the ongoing study conducted by six ACA members (the Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes (AMEUP), the Centre of the Republic of Slovenia for Mobility and European Educational and Training Programmes (CMEPIUS), the Czech National Agency for International Education and Research (DZS), Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation (OeAD), Tempus Public Foundaton (TPF), and the Icelandic Centre for Research (Rannis)). Academic staff who have been mobile typically encourage students to participate in mobility programmes, and administrative staff with prior mobility experience can offer better support and more empathetic advice to incoming students, as well as ensure

better preparation of outgoing students, having experienced themselves the conditions at partner institutions.

- **Synergies between student and staff mobility should be further explored, as should be experimentations in terms of group mobilities and coupled mobility windows for both students and staff. The latter can be supported together with a variety of post-mobility activities linked to dissemination of experience gained abroad targeting mixed audiences.**
- **Sensitising higher education leaders on the impact of staff mobility at the institutional level and offering language training and mentoring schemes for early career academics are also equally important.**
- **The scope of staff mobility under the Erasmus+ programme could be further expanded to a broader range of activities, including partner search, project development and preparation, or research activities, to align better with institutional realities and needs.**

Interest in staff mobility varies significantly across different countries, types of institutions, and career profiles. Some of the persistent barriers include a lack of time or contacts abroad, insufficient language skills and lack of confidence, as well as a demotivating professional environment or family situation. Recognition of staff mobility experiences is highly important for engaging a broader group of staff members.

- **Recognising the value and additional effort of gaining a mobility experience abroad as part of career progression or workload arrangements by home institutions can be potentially decisive for early career academic staff as well as administrative staff, and should be further incentivised at both the national and European level.**
- **Since staff mobility can be seen as an immanent driver for HR development at higher education institutions, intensified cooperation between international units and HR departments is a key success factor, and further experimentation and related activities should be promoted.**
- **Blended mobility opportunities for staff with a possibility to fulfill parts of teaching or other commitments at a home or host institution online should be further explored and promoted to widen participation.**

Continuing and enhancing the support at all levels for mobility is essential for having thriving graduates, excellent higher education institutions, and for addressing wider societal challenges. ACA hopes that through shedding new light on its relevance, the upcoming learning mobility framework will contribute to this end.

ACA members



Austria's Agency for Education
and Internationalisation - OeAD-
GmbH, Austria



Flemish Higher Education
Council – VLUHR
International, Belgium



Agency for Mobility and EU
Programmes – AMEUP,
Croatia



Czech National Agency
for International
Education and
Research - DZS,
Czech Republic



Education and Youth Board
of Estonia – HARNO, Estonia



Finnish National Agency for
Education – EDUFI, Finland



German Academic
Exchange Service –
DAAD, Germany



State Scholarships
Foundation – IKY,
Greece



Tempus Public Foundation
– TPF, Hungary



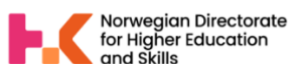
The Icelandic Centre for
Research – Rannís, Iceland



Uni-Italia, Italy



The Dutch
Organisation for
Internationalisation in
Education – Nuffic,
Netherlands



Norwegian Directorate for
Higher Education and Skills –
HK-dir, Norway



Polish National Agency for
Academic Exchange –
NAWA, Poland



Erasmus + Portuguese
National Agency,
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Slovak Academic
Information Agency –
SAIA, n.o., Slovakia



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Educational
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Spanish Service for
the Internationalization of
Education – SEPIE, Spain



Swedish Council for Higher
Education – UHR,
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ABOUT ACA

Working under the motto “the European voice of national organizations for the internationalisation of higher education”, the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) is a leading European association supporting research, innovative practice-development and smart policy-making in international higher education (HE). Established in 1993 as a member-driven platform, ACA provides a shared voice to national agencies for the internationalization of higher education in Brussels and represents them in Europe and globally. Within ACA, the member organisations enhance their capacities and join forces in supporting and ‘doing’ future-oriented, top-quality internationalisation. ACA is also a brain-trust, with a long track record in conducting sound research and providing expert advice on key developments in international HE to universities, governments and supra-national organizations alike. ACA’s core membership and identity is distinctly European, with an eye on global trends. The association is supported by a Brussels-based Secretariat that plays a coordinator and expert role for the membership.