



Co-funded by
the European Union



The future of Erasmus+ is the future of Europe

Investing in higher education at EU level



ACA POSITION PAPER
MAY 2025

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Preamble

Erasmus+ is a highly successful programme that offers unique opportunities for internationalisation and innovation of education in Europe, with a proven and **far-reaching impact** on individuals, institutions, education systems, and very importantly, the wider society and European economy. Detailed evidence presented in ACA's position paper "The future of Erasmus+: The future of Europe" (February 2025) demonstrates the **foundational role of Erasmus+ in building a competitive, resilient, and socially fair Europe**, particularly through its higher education actions.

Erasmus+ plays a vital role in enabling all young Europeans to engage in international exchange, which is essential for fostering an open-minded and inclusive European society. More **globally**, the programme offers a unique opportunity not only to attract talent and foster mutually beneficial partnerships across sectors, but also to promote the EU's innovative, inclusive, and value-driven model, and to contribute to the Union's peace and security interests in the longer run¹, building on its science diplomacy legacy².

As a proven and outstanding **driving force behind European policies**, Erasmus+ has long been at the forefront of transformative change, supporting a wide range of strategic policy initiatives across the EU. At present, the programme is **uniquely positioned to make an even greater contribution** to the objectives set out under the recent Union of Skills, the EU Competitiveness Compass, and the EU Preparedness Union Strategy initiatives, which are key to shaping the future of Europe.

Looking ahead in a rapidly changing environment, where political priorities continue to evolve, **Erasmus+ stands as a solid anchor**, helping to ensure that Europe remains firmly committed to its fundamental goals of innovation and social inclusion, despite the shifting pressures brought by successive and multiplying crises. There is only one conceivable future for the next Erasmus+ programme - one in which it is empowered to further build on the landmark achievements of the current generation and take them to the next level, broadening and deepening its internal impact in higher education.

¹ The importance of EU's global partnerships in higher education and research is demonstrated in a joint position paper co-signed by several ACA members (DAAD, EDUFI, HK-Dir, and OeAD) as well as other Stakeholders in March 2025. URL: www.daad-brussels.eu/files/2025/04/S-DHG-Position-paper_final.pdf

² For more details, see the European Framework for Science Diplomacy. URL: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/european-framework-science-diplomacy-2025-02-13_en

Against this background, ACA members believe the new Erasmus+ programme should be guided by the following **main principles**:

- **Ensuring continuity** by preserving the current structure of the programme, which has effectively supported the further advancement of internationalisation of national higher education systems and institutions, responded to the diverse needs of students and staff, and demonstrated its value through the lessons of the mid-term evaluation and the successes of the current programme cycle;
- **Ensuring a strong and visible role for higher education** within the programme;
- **Scaling up the contribution of programme actions** to the priorities of inclusion,³ the twin transition, innovation, and civic engagement, while **strengthening links to competitiveness, the labour market**, and the future skills and competences sought by employers and young entrepreneurs - within the existing programme structure;
- **Further widening participation in mobility** through a diverse set of actions and radical simplification measures, in line with the new targets set under the Europe on the Move initiative (i.e., 23% of mobile higher education graduates);
- **Achieving deeper and broader impact on the EU's newest goals by consolidating the novel actions** introduced in the current programme generation such as a stronger global dimension enabled by the international opening of KA131, the development of new mobility formats such as Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs), and the support to deep transnational cooperation through European Universities alliances, while adopting targeted improvements. Framing this progression as an evolution will enable the programme to demonstrate its maturity and its capacity to adapt responsively to changing priorities, while maintaining strategic coherence.

This paper outlines a series of **measures** for the higher education part of the Erasmus+ programme, covering mobility, partnerships and international dimension actions, discussed by ACA members in 2024–2025 with the aim to support the design of the future Erasmus+ programme while addressing the EU's newest political agenda.

³ ACA policy input "Erasmus+: Consolidating efforts for an impactful future", December 2023. URL: <https://aca-secretariat.be/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ACA-statement-on-Erasmus-mid-term-review.pdf>

1. Ensuring wider and more impactful mobility of students and staff

Since its inception, individual mobility has been at the heart of the Erasmus+ programme, fueling European integration, with 10 million participants experiencing Europe between 1987 and 2020, and another 10 million expected to benefit under the current programme generation. As a result, **Erasmus+ has become firmly anchored in the life cycle of many young European students**, and the new targets set under the Europe on the Move initiative demonstrate the political will to make these opportunities accessible to an even wider group of participants.

- 1.1 **Physical mobility of students and staff across all fields and disciplines** is crucial for increasing the quality of education and for developing competences of the future, as well as promoting European values. Hence, it should remain the core element of the future programme, complemented by new mobility formats. These new formats should play a supporting role, with their quality continuously monitored and enhanced and their wider use based on robust evidence of added value and impact.
- 1.2 **More flexible and simplified mobility formats** could help engage a broader range of participants and enable institutions to deploy their resources more strategically. Attracting students with fewer opportunities, or from less internationalised fields such as teacher training, medical studies, or STEM, could be encouraged by offering shorter physical mobility periods (between 30 days and two months), complementary with and leading to longer mobility periods in the future. In addition, improvements in the design and delivery of the online component of BIPs could enhance their impact and make them more appealing to students and staff. Staff mobility should also become more open and flexible, encompassing not only learning, teaching, and professional development, but also activities supporting research-based training, university-business collaboration, or civic engagement, with stronger use for professional development and capacity-building. In this context, the new programme should aim to continue reducing administrative barriers for both students and staff, thereby enabling broader and more effective participation in diverse mobility formats.
- 1.3 To support the EU's innovation goals, the **new programme should place a stronger focus on mobility for traineeships** and foster more structured and strategic cross-border collaboration between universities and industry. This would enable top-quality, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary training in areas of strategic importance for Europe — such as advanced materials, quantum technologies, biotechnology, robotics, and space technologies — while also promoting the Single Market.

1.4 To strengthen the societal pillar, the next programme should place **greater emphasis on civic engagement and European values**. This could be achieved by integrating opportunities for cross-border service learning or community-based work into curricula, anchored academically, and by offering training on democratic participation for both students and staff. Such initiatives could be embedded within the existing traineeship opportunities in higher education.

Stronger links to the skills and values agendas will require targeted incentives, such as additional support for implementing mobility consortia, dedicated organisational support, and funding for incoming Erasmus+ Student Mobility for Traineeships (SMT). Such additional support would enable higher education institutions to build stronger links with companies and civil society organisations, to engage students as equal partners in implementing the programme's priorities, and enhance post-mobility support, which is crucial for outcome dissemination, reintegration, and transitions to the labour market. This would also pave the way for a more strategic use of the **Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE)** encouraging institutions to develop specific institutional plans for the entire new programme generation and its priorities, more closely aligned with their own strategic objectives.

Beyond the necessary investment, structural improvements such as **further simplification of mobility administration** are highly needed and can be achieved through several measures. The lump sum approach should be expanded (while retaining the possibility to claim real costs for inclusion support), calculations in days for longer mobilities should be abolished, and a simplified application process should be introduced for KA171 — for example, by removing the quality assessment and working with larger geographic envelopes, to the extent possible. Greater alignment between KA171 and KA131 should be pursued for outgoing mobilities, covered under Heading 2, with the possibility of a future merger. If a merger is envisaged, simplification must remain the guiding principle to ensure that the current KA131 structure is not made more complex as a result. At the same time, the effort should also focus on preserving and further strengthening the existing positive aspects and essential features of each action. This includes, for instance, ensuring participant safety in mobilities with third countries under KA171, maintaining visibility of international actions and engaging all kinds of higher education institutions in global partnerships and exchanges, and effectively managing the 'gap year' in KA171 during transitions to the new programme cycles.

2. Bolstering partnerships in a new policy context

One of the main strengths and unique features of the Erasmus+ programme has been its ability to nurture **bottom-up initiatives and support the diversity of institutional partnerships**. As a decentralised action, cooperation partnerships have been both impactful at the local level and more accessible to newcomers. To ensure such bottom-up engagement, it is essential to preserve the current balance between centralised and decentralised administration, while realigning EU's broader strategic priorities within the Erasmus+ programme.

2.1 If tighter thematic areas or topics are introduced under the next programme to support Europe's strategic autonomy or other goals, the higher education sector should retain the **freedom to offer its own interpretations and solutions** to the challenges addressed, as well as to select partners and cooperation formats. Such flexibility is essential to encourage disruptive innovation and creative thinking, which cannot be pre-programmed or planned in advance. Annual work programmes and calls should therefore remain sufficiently open and feature a wide range of areas that resonate with as many prospective applicants as possible, without requiring any prior thematic background in a specific topic.

2.2 The renewed policy objectives linked to skills, competitiveness, and democratic values should be addressed by **leveraging and scaling up existing formats**, rather than introducing new ones, building on lessons learnt from predecessor schemes under previous Erasmus+ programmes.

2.3 Greater emphasis should be placed on **cooperation with industry partners**, drawing on the lessons learnt from the EIT Higher Education Initiative and Knowledge Alliances implemented in the period 2014-2020. The latter demonstrate significant impact on higher education institutions' capacity to tackle skills mismatches in the labour market by fostering interdisciplinarity, facilitating better ICT integration, and strongly supporting development and application of innovative pedagogies⁴. Such cooperation requires simplifying the conditions for industry participation, while preserving the core role of higher education institutions in ensuring the quality of education in view of the rapidly evolving demands of the labour market. Given the crucial role of the higher education sector in lifelong learning, it should also be fully integrated into upskilling and reskilling actions.

2.4 Recognising the outstanding role of the **European Universities Initiative** as a flagship initiative in the higher education sector while acknowledging its long-term nature, the

⁴ European Commission (2019). Study on the impact of Erasmus+ Higher Education Strategic Partnerships and Knowledge Alliances at local, national and European levels on key Higher Education policy priorities. URL: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/9369267b-7ae2-11e9-9f05-01aa75ed71a1>

number of alliances funded through the Erasmus+ programme should be consolidated in the next programme based on the lessons learnt from the Monitoring Framework and the current Investment Pathway. The future funding model for the alliances should avoid reserving access to any additional KA2 or KA1 resources (beyond the already earmarked) and apply a more selective approach by evaluating in greater depth the concrete impact and progress of individual alliances. This would safeguard funding for the most committed and impactful alliances — for example, those allocating their own resources or achieving change that would not have been possible without the alliance framework — while creating space for high-quality newcomer alliances to enter the initiative in the next programming period.

2.5 Based on the lessons learnt from the Monitoring Framework for the alliances, it would be important to improve **methodology, indicators, and reporting requirements** for other types of partnerships to better evaluate project impact on different target groups at various levels (individual, institutional, regional, national, European etc.), while pursuing a more effective and innovative approach to impact dissemination and sustainability.

Importantly, sufficient funds should be reserved for different types of partnerships to **maintain a diverse funding landscape** and to avoid creating a two-tier system of higher education institutions in Europe. Consequently, partnerships should be re-equipped with an adequate level of funding to counteract the annual decrease observed in the current programme and to better address the needs of the wider sector.

3. Enhancing the global dimension

The global dimension of the Erasmus+ programme—i.e., mobility and cooperation with higher education institutions and other actors outside member states and countries associated to the programme—is just as essential as its intra-European agenda for building a competitive, resilient, socially fair, and secure Europe. The Union's ability to keep pace with and drive technological developments, and to find solutions to increasingly global societal challenges (such as climate change, health crises, demographic and democratic shifts, and armed conflicts), has been fueled—and will remain exponentially dependent on—the Union's **continued openness to the world**.

With democratic values, scientific evidence, knowledge, and education increasingly questioned around the world, Europe cannot afford to step back from global engagement. On the contrary, it must make concerted efforts to continue to be seen as a key player across all fields, including (higher) education worldwide. **Strengthening the global dimension of the future Erasmus+ programme is therefore a clear necessity.**

A strong and clearly defined global dimension of the programme will continue to deliver unequivocal benefits not only for partner countries and institutions—which is important in itself, as it promotes European democratic leadership—but also for European higher education institutions, their wider systems, societies, and economies. For example:

- Awarding Erasmus Mundus scholarships to non-European top talent has enabled higher education institutions in Europe, including many smaller, medium-sized, and highly specialised institutions, to gain or enhance visibility on the international stage, engage in global student recruitment, and boost the **quality of their study programmes**—leading to increased attractiveness and innovation spillover.
- Cooperations with non-European partners through actions such as Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) have enabled European higher education institutions to gain knowledge on and cooperate with regions outside Europe, particularly in the Global South, which is crucial for solving global challenges. Through CBHE projects, European institutions have also managed to advance their curricula, offer students **unique fieldwork and internship opportunities in highly specialised and critical areas** (e.g., water management, green energy, climate change, food sustainability), test prototypes and technologies in situ, and ultimately equip graduates with skills they could not have acquired practically at home—giving them a distinct competitive advantage on the global labour market. CBHE projects have also been instrumental in promoting European educational tools (such as Bologna) outside Europe, thus, facilitating future cooperation, and eventually attracting skilled workers by supporting the design of study programmes in critical fields.

Concretely, a stronger global dimension in the future Erasmus+ programme should:

- 3.1 Continue to be rooted in the **bottom-up character of international partnerships**, driven by mutually beneficial goals and interests, and based on a fair cooperation approach, while allowing for some prioritisation in specific areas where the Union seeks to enhance its competitiveness or achieve more targeted impact, in line with the relevant EU policy objectives. Such prioritisation should be approached carefully, avoiding any alienation of international partners and demonstrating a clear commitment not to revert to practices that could be perceived as reminiscent of Europe's colonial past. In this vein, shifting away from terminology such as "Capacity Building" towards alternatives like "Global Partnerships" could be beneficial.
- 3.2 In line with the **EU's enlargement agenda** (Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia), build on the lessons learnt from Serbia, North Macedonia, Türkiye, and **enable higher education institutions from the enlargement countries to participate as full partners** in existing Erasmus+ actions, to support them in further enhancing their capacities, for example by starting with the mobility actions, and then extending to

institutional collaboration formats. ACA members' experience shows that Cooperation Partnerships allow for a targeted focus on and inclusion of the cultural and shared heritage of the neighbouring countries and can serve as important entry points for deeper cooperation, fostering mutual understanding and support to the long-term integration of these countries into the European Higher Education Area.

3.3 Refine the international degree mobility target introduced in the Union of Skills Communication—350,000 learners from outside the EU—as an indicator of the attractiveness of European higher education. This target should be further specified (e.g., target for new non-European entrants on an annual basis vs. a cumulative target across all years of higher education, differentiation between students and graduates, baseline data) and **equipped with targeted funding and actions**.

3.4 Integrate cooperation with so-called industrialised countries (or rather simply 'priority international partner countries') in existing partnership models within the programme in line with the Union of Skills ambitions. Such participation could be enabled through an associate or full partner status in case co-funding is available and can be guaranteed for a longer period via the respective partner countries, as it was the case in the past (e.g., Atlantis, EU-USA, EU-Canada, ACP S&T, ICP ECP initiatives). It could also be geared towards tackling global challenges, keeping a broader and open approach, in synergies with other policy instruments and programmes, such as Global Gateway and FP10.

A **stronger global dimension must be appropriately funded**—through both internal (current Heading 2) and external funding instruments (current Heading 6), which are both essential. Despite the complexity of external funding instruments, their existence and integration of these in Erasmus+ has been critically important in enabling European higher education institutions to engage in greater depth and scope in partner regions, enhance their expertise, and build truly global networks, while still adhering to the Erasmus+ logic.

4. Fostering synergies between intra-European and external actions

The **Erasmus Mundus** action has connected effectively the intra-European and global dimensions of Erasmus+, playing a key role in enhancing graduates' employability, paving the way for the award of truly joint degrees in the European context, driving wide and deep institutional transformations, and supporting initiatives such as the European Degree flagship initiative and the growing interest of European Universities alliances in developing joint programmes—both within and beyond the alliance framework.

This success has largely inspired the EU's political aspirations to **increase the number of joint programmes** funded through Erasmus+ by extending the related opportunities to more programmes than is currently the case and reaching a greater number of talented students. In developing these opportunities and creating synergies between the current Erasmus Mundus Action, the European degree plans, and the evolving practices of European Universities alliances, it will be crucial to safeguard and build on the immense expertise gained through Erasmus Mundus in its two components of funding:

4.1 **The institutional dimension** (and related funding): One of the distinctive and breakthrough features of the current Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's programmes (EMJM) is their **unparalleled degree of jointness** (encompassing the full programme cycle, from their design, to recruitment, promotion, admissions, delivery, recognition and certification), leading to a superior quality of education reflected in their high attractiveness and selectivity. This jointness translates into a minimum of 3 institutional partners being more ambitious than the typical double degree programmes and more illustrative of Europe's multilateral mode of cooperation. Another distinctive feature of the current EMJMs is their **multi/interdisciplinarity**, leading to innovation that cannot be achieved under purely national approaches. As STEM subjects gain visibility in the current policy discourse, and could be the focus of future joint programmes, rooting such support in multi/interdisciplinary approaches will be more impactful for the Union in a longer run. Also, thanks to the **possibility to engage HEIs from non-associated countries as full partners**, the respective EMJMs have been able to provide European students with unique study and learning experiences, fostering acquisition of new skills, and equipping them with deep knowledge of the partner countries' systems, societies, and economies.

4.2 **The scholarships dimension** (and related funding): initially designed for top talent from outside Europe, Erasmus Mundus has gradually opened up to qualified candidates from EU member states and countries associated to Erasmus+. **Covering both categories of applicants will remain a key strength in the future**, ensuring the attractiveness of scholarships—particularly given the additional costs and complexities of completing three mobility periods within a single programme. This is essential to continue attracting highly qualified candidates, especially at a time when the attractiveness of some leading student destinations may be declining due to rising political uncertainties and protectionist measures.

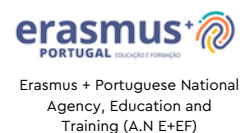
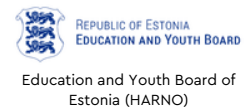
Conclusion

Erasmus+ stands as one of the EU's most outstanding programmes—an essential instrument for opening access to Europe for all people, especially young generations. It must continue to serve as a gateway to learning, exchange, and shared European values, ensuring that no one is left behind on the path toward a more united, inclusive, and forward-looking Europe. The Erasmus+ programme has played a pivotal role in building a more innovative, competitive, socially fair, and secure Europe.

As Europe faces profound global and societal transformations, the **programme's role as a driver of resilience, talent development, and cooperation has never been more critical**. Strengthening Erasmus+ in higher education is essential not only to consolidate its achievements, but to ensure that Europe remains a global leader in education, innovation, and social cohesion. A bold and sustained investment in the programme is an investment in Europe's future.

Given the current attractiveness (and, thus, oversubscription) of both KA1 and KA2 initiatives in higher education, the financial requirements of wider and more impactful participation in mobility (in line with the Europe on the Move targets), and the need for long-term investment in partnerships and in strengthening Europe's global positioning through higher education, the **future Erasmus+ programme will require a minimum two-fold budgetary increase over 2021-2027 levels**, coupled with administrative simplification and use of more flexible, complementary mobility formats. These combined measures are critical to supporting a wider and more ambitious range of projects that advance Europe's core objectives in a context marked by financial limitations.

FULL MEMBERS



ASSOCIATE MEMBERS



About ACA

Working under the motto "the European voice of national organisations for the internationalisation of higher education", the Academic Cooperation Association (ACA) is a leading European association supporting research, innovative practice-development and smart policymaking in international higher education. Created in 1993 as a member-driven platform, ACA provides a shared voice to national agencies for the internationalisation 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' internationalisation. ACA also has a long track record in conducting sound research and providing expert advice on key developments in international higher education to universities, governments and supra-national organisations 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.

