



## ***Towards a more ambitious, integrated and inclusive Erasmus plus***

*The GIURI is an informal group representing the Italian Research and Innovation community in Brussels. The platform gathers the EU Liaison Offices of Italian R&I stakeholders, including universities, research centres, industries, trade associations, financial intermediaries, regions, and local bodies.*

*Since 2019, the GIURI has decided to also approach the themes of “education” and “training,” within a holistic vision, where research, education/training, and innovation are key components of the knowledge cycle.*

*As a representative of the interests of the Italian R&I community at the EU level, the GIURI intends to contribute to the positioning of the next Erasmus+ programme. This contribution may not fully reflect the positions of individual GIURI members.*

### **Introduction**

Over the past 35 years, Erasmus+ has certainly proven to be a well-known and respected brand in the field of education and training, with a strong reputation for promoting mobility, cooperation, and excellence. It has promoted cultural exchange and understanding, encouraging a sense of European citizenship and cooperation among participants.

Erasmus+ has been shown to have a positive impact on the employability of participants, with many reporting improved job prospects and career advancement after taking part in the programme. It has also promoted innovative approaches to education and training, such as the use of digital technologies, and supporting the development of new skills and competences.

The 2021-2027 Erasmus+ Programme functions as a relevant tool for Italian companies, particularly SMEs, to address the challenges posed by the green and digital transition, particularly with regard to skills. The objectives of Erasmus+ align with the needs of the industrial sector, and the programme is proven to be a solid and flexible reference tool for continuous training and business consulting organisations, as well as for management development.

In this regard, Erasmus+ supports most of the EU strategic goals and, thus, requires an increase in its budget in the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to remain on a positive track and benefit the economy and society at large.

The Erasmus+ programme has been a cornerstone of European cooperation in the above-mentioned areas, providing opportunities for millions of young people to study, train, and volunteer abroad. As we approach the next programming period, 2028-2034, it is crucial that we build on the successes of Erasmus+ and address its challenges to ensure that the programme continues to empower a new generation of Europeans and spread its political message of peace and democracy.

Our vision for Erasmus+ 2028-2034 is to create a programme that is more ambitious, inclusive, innovative, and effective in promoting European values, skills, employability, competitiveness, and mobility. We believe that Erasmus+ should be a catalyst for the development of a European Education Area, where students, teachers, and researchers can move freely, collaborate, and innovate.

Despite the undeniable results of the past Erasmus+ programming, we still have a long way to go. We must be aware that we are moving within a changing context characterised by exogenous variables that could significantly impact the education system and that we must be prepared to address:

- **Economic crises and geopolitical instability:** Economic crises, such as the one triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, can impact Erasmus+ funding and participation, as well as the overall economy and job market. The increasing focus on EU defence and EU sovereignty across various domains, caused inter alia by the geopolitical instability, could impact on the EU priorities and could divert financial resources away from education, particularly from initiatives (e.g. EUAs) requiring long-term financial sustainability.

- **Nationalism and protectionism:** Rising nationalism and protectionism in some EU countries could affect Erasmus+ participation and funding, particularly if governments prioritise national interests over European cooperation.
- **Impact of the demographic winter on Member States:** A declining and ageing population brings new challenges, with a crucial impact on the Member States and Regions that are already affected by brain drain. The shrinking working-age population puts pressure on labour markets and welfare systems; increases the old-age dependency ratio; and raises the per capita burden of public debt. To sustain economic growth, the working-age population must increase, labour force participation rates must go up and/or productivity must increase through technological advances and/or skills development. In this context the next Erasmus+ may face challenges in ensuring the quality and relevance of its initiatives, particularly if they are not aligned with labour market needs or fail to strengthen its international dimension.
- **Impact of AI on the education system:** Erasmus+ should demonstrate its responsiveness and adaptability, both in terms of objectives and tools, to the new challenges arising from the impact of AI on the educational systems.
- **Shifting attitudes on mobility:** Young people's attitudes towards international mobility have undergone notable changes in recent years, influenced by both global challenges and evolving opportunities. While the COVID-19 pandemic initially disrupted cross-border education, interest in studying abroad has rebounded, albeit with a shift in priorities. Students are increasingly drawn to destinations offering affordability, streamlined visa processes, and strong post-graduation career prospects. University students continue to express interest in spending a semester abroad, but there is also a growing preference for shorter and more flexible programmes. This diversity in programme preferences reflects students' desire for flexibility and adaptability, allowing them to balance academic commitments with experiential learning opportunities.
- **New models and tools to approach change management:** Adopting new models and tools for change management is essential for all organisations, including the education system as a whole (see the ADKAR model, which can be applied to teaching and learning processes).

## Our vision

Erasmus+ 2028-2034 has the potential to be a **game-changer** for European education, training, and youth. By prioritising inclusivity, digitalisation, sustainability, and innovation, we can empower a new generation of Europeans to become active, engaged, and responsible citizens. We call on the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council to work together to ensure that Erasmus+ 2028-2034 is adequately funded, effectively implemented, and responsive to meet the needs and aspirations of young people across Europe.

We urge the European institutions, for the next multiannual programming of Erasmus+, to take into consideration the following objectives:

- **Maintaining the brand Erasmus+, fostering a European identity:** Promote a strong European identity and sense of citizenship among Erasmus+ participants, including through cultural and linguistic exchange, and European studies
- **Defining clear priorities,** in coordination with other EU programmes to guarantee the maximise the end-user participation (e.g. the newcomers) and **the realisation of synergies** with other programmes. The future programme should also better communicate the structure and distribution of centralised and decentralised actions, ensuring accessibility for newcomers.
- **Promoting the Sustainable Development Goals:** Erasmus+ could be more closely aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which could increase its impact and relevance.
- **Equipping the workforce with skills** to support breakthrough innovation, industrial transformation, and decarbonisation processes ensuring the **transferability** of these skills and approaches to facilitate their **recognition**.
- **Promoting digitalisation:** We propose that Erasmus+ 2028-2034 prioritises digitalisation, including the development of online platforms, virtual mobility, and digital skills training.
- **Advancing sustainability and environmental awareness:** We recommend that Erasmus+ 2028-2034 incorporates a strong focus on sustainability and environmental awareness, including concrete measures to reduce the programme's carbon footprint and promote sustainable development.

- **Promoting administrative simplification:** Erasmus+ may face administrative burdens, particularly regarding reporting, monitoring, and evaluation, which can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. An administrative simplification could be crucial to realising synergies among the various EU funds. To make Erasmus+ even more accessible and equitable, grant rates should be further simplified. The **lump sum model** had a positive impact on the beneficiaries in terms of budget predictability and flexibility in the project management activities. Furthermore, lump-sums impose smaller thresholds for project budget creation, and, in some cases, it proves challenging to strike the right balance between personnel costs, project duration, and activities to be implemented, undermining the quality of projects. The previous Erasmus programme, which was based on predefined cost categories and standard costs, allowed for more robust planning of activities and provided top-down parameters that facilitated the sharing of contractual, financial, and management rules among partners. Therefore, a better balance between project types and funding modalities would be desirable, which would improve the quality and effectiveness of projects.

- **Upskilling and reskilling through education and training:** these must be emphasised in the next Erasmus+, aligning with the *Union of Skills Strategy* and providing a specific space for **micro-credential initiatives**, particularly in specific sectors characterised by skills and labour shortages. Erasmus+ could strengthen its partnerships with businesses, creating more opportunities for work-based learning, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Erasmus+ could support the development of new skills, such as those related to artificial intelligence, data science, and cybersecurity. Furthermore, it is essential to place greater focus on technical training as part of continuing education, reinforcing the Vocational Education and Training (VET) component within the programme's structure. Investing not only in preparing new professional profiles but also in developing innovative approaches and methodologies for technical training is crucial, within the logic of reskilling and upskilling.

- **Promoting greater support for university-industry cooperation:** Erasmus+ KA2 projects currently offer mutually beneficial outcomes, as industry partners contribute to enhancing the relevance of higher education programmes in a rapidly developing economic context, gaining in return access to upskilling opportunities and subsequently increasing their expertise and qualifications. This strong collaboration needs to be increasingly supported in the future.

- **Increasing mobility and flexibility solutions:** Offer more flexible mobility options, including targeted short-term and virtual mobility, to cater to diverse needs and interests. A particular priority should be to establish specific mobility programmes aimed at revitalising rural territories and remote areas. This action would address the crucial need to re-energise rural areas, which risk feeling marginalised in the European integration process. On the other hand, rural mobility represents an innovative mobility model that broadens the opportunities offered by the Erasmus+ mobility programme, **enabling university students from different European universities to engage with and build relationships with local communities in rural and mountain areas across Europe**. Through rural mobility, universities contribute directly to the sustainable development of territories by involving extensive networks of local stakeholders – **networks that are created and strengthened thanks to rural mobility programmes** and can endure beyond the project's conclusion.

- **Supporting the European Universities Alliances (EUAs):** We support the development of European Universities and Alliances, which contribute to the creation of a European Education Area and enhance the internationalisation of higher education. **It is essential to provide the EUAs with structural multiannual financial support (i.e. an Ordinary Finance Fund), moving beyond the project-based funding scheme, and incentivising the monitoring of performance and impact (e.g. the KIC model).** Following the start-up phase, the EUAs initiative has required a significant effort from partner universities, both in terms of internal investment and in-kind contributions from academic and professional staff on a daily basis. A long-term, stable funding perspective is necessary to ensure the operational functioning of the EUAs, offering ordinary financial support while simultaneously encouraging performance, within a framework of competitive funds. The proposal is that financial contributions should be allocated in a way that balances the need to support the EUAs' long-term strategy with the ambition to reward their short-term performance. In addition to adequate financial coverage within the Erasmus+ programme, EUAs' should be able to benefit from complementary instruments provided across the board, such as Horizon Europe for research and/or the Digital Europe programme for advanced skills.

- **Establishing a Coordinated Framework among different EUAs:** Create a centralised framework that facilitates regular communication and collaboration between the EUAs and EIT HEI alliances. This framework should include representatives from both initiatives to ensure alignment of goals and activities.

Currently, both programmes are planned and implemented by DG EAC. Thus, greater collaboration at institutional level would be important.

- **Fostering regional collaboration:** Encourage collaboration between different European Alliances at the regional level, where multiple universities work together across different alliances. This will help to create synergies, enhance the overall impact of the initiatives, and ensure the efficient use of resources.
- **Capitalising on funded projects:** Focus on the capitalisation of projects funded by Erasmus+, such as Alliances for Innovation and Strategic Partnerships, to maximise their impact and sustainability.
- **Strengthening linkages with the R&I dimension and the Framework Programme for R&I:** Erasmus+ 2028-2034 should **reinforce its ties with the Research and Innovation (R&I) dimension, particularly by fostering stronger synergies with the Framework Programme for R&I (FP10) and, in particular, the EUAs.** Greater interaction among the education, research, and innovation dimensions would support the creation of dynamic ecosystems that drive scientific excellence, technological advancement, and societal progress. **Dedicated funding streams within Erasmus+ should be established to align with R&I priorities,** enabling universities to expand interdisciplinary projects and further strengthen the European Research Area.
- **Sustaining the implementation of the European degree/label:** Support the implementation of the European degree/label through targeted actions, primarily directed at the EUAs as a natural testbed for experimenting the next generation of joint programmes. Since most challenges related to the European degree/label stem from numerous legislative and administrative barriers, we also advocate for specific measures, backed by tailored financial resources, to enhance the involvement of the national authorities and establish a structured and permanent dialogue, as outlined in the next bullet point.
- **Strengthening institutional synergies:** Promote, at the European Commission level, a structured and permanent dialogue with Member States to encourage coordinated and aligned co-investments. This is particularly relevant in the context of the proposed reform of the Cohesion Policy and the adoption of common standards for the implementation of the European degree. Institutional synergies could serve as a preparatory step towards the establishment of a **reinforced cooperation procedure** within the Council of the EU.

- **Strengthening synergies with other EU funded programmes:** Within the future EU funding landscape, the European Commission should foster a holistic and strategic approach by encouraging the submission of proposals that reflect a long-term vision and multi-annual implementation plan for educational, methodological, technological, research, and innovation development. Indeed, the Erasmus programme enhances the quality of actions implemented alongside other instruments and funding programs, such as the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and transnational cooperation schemes such as Interreg.
- **Leveraging Cohesion Policy and Structural Funds:** Fully exploit the opportunities offered by the Cohesion Policy and Structural Funds to support and expand Erasmus+ initiatives, ensuring adequate funding and fostering regional development.
- **Promoting large-scale pilot actions:** We suggest that EU Institutions experiment with the possibility of financing specific calls under EU funds through ad hoc pilot actions to better align investments in infrastructure and skills. For example, in the case of fostering digital skills, we observe that preliminary investments in digital infrastructure are considered a *conditio sine qua non* for any investment in skills development. The simplification of the next Multiannual Financial Framework could enable a process-oriented allocation of financial resources, potentially overcoming the current siloed approach.
- **Strengthening of the international dimension of Erasmus+ and the openness to countries outside the EU:** The next programme should include clear cross-references to other EU initiatives, funded, for example, through *Global Europe*, which supports mobility schemes and cooperation partnership/capacity-building projects in education with non-EU Countries. Furthermore, we advocate for a central role of the EUAs as a testbed for pilot actions aimed at attracting talents from outside the EU. Erasmus+ could be used to promote internationalisation, fostering the development of international partnerships that address the skills gap, and enhancing opportunities for quality jobs, joint degrees, and research collaborations. These collaborations should include concrete initiatives regions of strategic EU interest, such as Africa and the Balkans.
- **Fostering Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship:** We propose that Erasmus+ 2028-2034 places a stronger emphasis on youth employment and



entrepreneurship, incorporating measures to support start-ups, entrepreneurship education, and work-based learning opportunities.

- **Increasing focus on social inclusion:** Erasmus+ should place greater emphasis on social inclusion, ensuring enhanced support for disadvantaged groups, such as refugees, migrants, and people with disabilities. We advocate for measures to improve the inclusivity and accessibility of Erasmus+, including increased support for participants with disabilities, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and individuals from outermost regions. Additional, targeted support for refugees and migrants to access Erasmus+ opportunities and integrate into European societies should be introduced.
- **Improving quality and impact:** Erasmus+ should strengthen quality assurance and impact assessment mechanisms to ensure that projects and activities meet high standards and achieve their intended objectives.
- **Fostering industrial participation:** In the upcoming programming period, Erasmus+ should introduce calls with thematic focus on specific strategic sectors. To broaden industry participation, pilot calls could be launched for the establishment of Business Academies within SMEs, as well as for the planned Net Zero Industries Academies.
- **Introducing instruments for industries:** Companies require dedicated tools within Erasmus+ to facilitate targeted mobility and training aligned with their production and innovation needs. The programme must evolve to address the challenges posed by the digital and green transitions, reinforcing the link between education, research, and business. Only through closer integration between academia and industry can we train talents capable of navigating market transformations and strengthening Europe's competitiveness.
- **Increasing the Erasmus+ budget available for mobility of apprentices:** the budget currently allocated for apprentice mobility is often insufficient to meet demand. To ensure that apprentices have the same opportunities as university students to gain international experience, funding for apprenticeship mobility should be reviewed. In this regard, enhanced collaboration with the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EaFA) is encouraged. This multi-stakeholder platform aims to strengthening the quality, availability and visibility of apprenticeships in Europe while promoting apprentice mobility.