

Towards a truly European Erasmus grant #Erasmus500

In the last few months, we have witnessed an unprecedented disruption of our student exchange programmes¹. And yet, universities are safe in the knowledge that such challenges will be vanquished in the months ahead, while present times afford us the opportunity to reflect how future cooperation can be planned and enhanced.

The Erasmus programme provides an invaluable framework through which our universities create joint educational initiatives, promote innovation in teaching and learning and carry out peer-learning activities. The programme is a harbinger of the European Higher Education Area and of the European Education Area and has been expanded to support the European Universities Alliances. These three initiatives are bound to have a transformative impact on European Higher Education. But the beating heart of Erasmus has always been – and it will always be – the academic exchange opportunities it affords to millions of students. Student mobility cements not just inter-university cooperation, but the European project as a whole².

If Erasmus is a central catalyst to bring about European citizens who are open-minded, civically engaged and resilient to populism, it is essential that the next programme involves a greater number of participants and is more inclusive than is currently the case. For many years financial obstacles have been proven to be the single biggest deterrent to participation in mobility programmes³. That is why we call for a reformulation of the Erasmus grants into a simpler scheme comprising a universal baseline of 500€/month, for the following reasons:

- Approximately half of all European students work while they study⁴ and those who rely on that income to meet their living expenses find themselves structurally excluded from participating in Erasmus, as the financial support they would receive is too low. A grant of 500€/month would offer a realistic possibility to compensate for the loss of such income, allowing a much larger number of students to participate in the programme.
- Erasmus is the quintessential European experience, but its resource allocation strategies are everything but. Grant levels are currently scattered across 18 categories that are often applied inconsistently between countries⁵. A simpler

¹ Student Exchanges in Times of Crisis, Erasmus Student Network, retrieved at <https://esn.org/covidimpact-report>

² Insert link to Erasmus+ mid-term evaluation

³ Bologna with Student Eyes 2018, European Students Union - retrieved at https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/BWSE-2018_web_Pages.pdf

⁴ Social and Economic Conditions of Student life in Europe, Eurostudent, retrieved at https://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/EUROSTUDENT_VI_Synopsis_of_Indicators.pdf

⁵ Grants vary per type of mobility and according to a table where countries are grouped in three cost categories. However such clusters hide not just enormous differences among countries (e.g. Group 2, which accounts for nearly 70% of all outgoing students, includes countries with economic characteristics as diverse as Netherlands and Greece) but their existence has proven ineffective to ensure a rational resource allocation; e.g. German students doing an exchange in Portugal have a higher Erasmus grant than Portuguese students doing an exchange in Germany. The fact that top-ups meant for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is also applied in an inconsistent fashion compounds complexity and makes it nearly impossible to ensure equal treatment of students.

grant system would allow to better promote the programme to future participants and enhance transparency for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds⁶.

- In 2018, the average Erasmus grant was 336€/month⁷, which is manifestly insufficient to cover even accommodation costs in many European cities⁸. A 500€/month grant would provide all Erasmus students a far more reasonable choice of mobility destinations that they can afford.
- In the current system, a significant amount of grants cannot be allocated every year. By setting a minimum grant with the option of top-ups, it could be possible to reallocate these remaining funds and provide the necessary support to those who need it.

The radical simplicity of this proposal is aligned with the European Pillar of Social Rights⁹ and builds on successful experiments carried out by the DAAD in 2018 and 2019. By streamlining the management of the grants, we can reduce their administrative burden¹⁰ and cost, allocating more of the programme's budget directly to the beneficiaries: the students. According to our calculations,¹¹ a universal baseline of 500€/month is perfectly within reach of the forthcoming EU multiannual financial framework.

Making Erasmus simpler and more inclusive can also lead to reducing the carbon footprint of our exchange and cooperation activities if Erasmus students would be able to access low cost week-long train (and/or bus/ferry) tickets to reach (and return from) their host cities and universities¹². This would ensure that their academic exchange is also a journey of discovery through the history and culture of Europe.

We call upon the European Institutions and Member States to consider and adopt these proposals. This manifesto is undersigned by the leaders of the following institutions stakeholders and Members of the European Parliament:

⁶ Vossensteyn, J. J. H. (2005). *Perceptions of student price-responsiveness: A behavioural economics exploration of the relationships between socio-economic status, perceptions of financial incentives and student choice*. Enschede: Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS).

⁷ Insert link to 2018 programme report

⁸ Insert link to HousErasmus+ report or relevant peer reviewed article

⁹ In particular principles 6, 14 and 20 (but, regarding #20, should we equate Erasmus to an “essential services”?) found at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en

¹⁰ As per the DAAD experiment and original proposal, semesters (or trimesters) would be treated on a unit cost basis, thus simplifying payment, reporting and auditing of SMS mobilities

¹¹ An analysis of the 2018 programme budget shows the amount spent on SMS and SMP mobility averaged 1.818€ to 2.209€€ per student. These amounts would suffice to cover in between 3.6 and 4.4 months abroad per participant at a rate of 500€/month; the average duration of a SMS/SMP mobility is currently 5.1 months, but this is bound to decrease in the next programme as short/blended mobilities will be added to it. Accordingly, a modest increase of the budget line allocated to HE mobilities in the next MFF would already suffice to cover the higher grants.

¹² Exceptions to this rule would obviously continue to apply as necessary, notably as far as mobilities to/from outermost countries and regions are concerned