Chapter 3

Title

**Erasmus+ as the EU Answer
to the Educational Challenges Faced by Europe**

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Introduction Demographic changes, the adaptation of the education system to labour market needs and the expectations of employers, the high unemployment rate among young and unskilled people - these are the key challenges for the educational institutions in Europe. As the challenges are complex and interrelated, education and training systems have to be appropriately adjusted in order to provide all European citizens with knowledge, skills and competences which help them meet both the demands of the workplace, market and modern life. Erasmus + is an answer of the European Union to the growing educational, social and economic challenges being faced by Europe. It is the Union's tool to contribute to economic development, high level of employment, social justice and social inclusion in Europe through the introduction of a variety of possibilities in the field of education and training.

Legal framework for cooperation in the field of education The issues in the field of education and training have to be dealt with by almost all European states. Within the European Union, education remains in the competences of the Member States, with the EU acting on the grounds of the subsidiarity principle. Under Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Community *"shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States through*

actions such as promoting the mobility of citizens, designing joint study programmes, establishing networks, exchanging information and teaching languages of the European Union. The Treaty also contains a commitment to promote life-long learning for all citizens of the Union." (*OJ C 326, 26.10.2012*)

So as to achieve the above, the competent institutions or agencies of the European Union set objectives, evaluate the progress made on the objectives, and provide soft law mechanisms such as guidelines, indicators and European benchmarks, which serve as points of reference for the Member States and help them measure progress towards the objectives. In the field of education, the EU operates based on the open method of cooperation, which rests on the voluntary cooperation of Member States with no official sanctions imposed for failure to comply with the law. Yet, the effectiveness of the method derives from peer pressure and the reputation of Member States, and brings positive results (Barcz, 2010: 14).

The main educational objectives set by the EU are prescribed in the strategic framework for Education and Training 2020 ('ET 2020'), which constitutes the foundation for the European cooperation in the field of education and training and is an element of the broader European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth for the decade 2010-2020 ('EU 2020'). The framework aims to support Member States in the development of their education and training systems. It sets out four long-term objectives, which include making lifelong learning and mobility a reality, improving the quality and the efficiency of education and training, promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship, as well as enhancing creativity and innovation at all levels of education and training ('ET 2020').

EU participation in education projects Moreover, the European Union is also a partner in various intergovernmental projects aiming at the modernisation of education systems and spreading quality education. The flagship example is the Bologna process, the objective of which was to create a European higher education area by harmonising higher education degrees as well as academic quality assurance standards throughout all EU Member States. The process was affirmed by signing the Bologna Declaration by education ministers from 29 countries in 1991 and later was opened to other states, i.e., the signatories to the European Cultural Convention of the Council of Europe. Although the Bologna process was created outside of the EU institutions, the Commission played an important role in its implementation by supporting the project connected to quality assurance. Although the participation in the Bologna process is completely voluntary, so far it has attracted 47 participating countries and 49 signatories, as the system creates transparency in terms of qualifications in education and facilitates transnational cooperation.

Within the framework of education policy the European Commission and Member States have also created the Eurydice network aiming at the facilitation of European cooperation in the field of education systems and policies. The network encompasses 37 countries, including 28 Member States, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey. Under the motto of better knowledge for better policies, Eurydice prepares and publishes analyses, studies and comparable data on issues common to European education systems. The network is coordinated by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency in Brussels, which in terms of education is supervised by the Directorate-General of the European Commission responsible for Education and Culture.

Erasmus Plus - scope and objectives of the programme The work of the network is currently co-funded by the Erasmus + programme, one of the most important tools of the EU for the achievement of the objectives and benchmarks set in the strategic framework. Built upon the experience of more than 25 years of European programmes such as *Lifelong Learning, Youth in Action, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alfa, Edulink,* Erasmus + promotes synergies and cross-fertilisation between various fields of education, training and youth, and removing artificial barriers. The programme aims at becoming an effective instrument addressing real needs related to human and social capital development in Europe. The main objectives of Erasmus + include the modernisation of education, training and youth work across Europe as well as boosting skills and contributing to the increased employability. The budget of €14.7 billion reflects the EU's commitment to investing in the area of education and research. Erasmus + has been created to give opportunities for over 4 million Europeans to study, train, gain work experience and volunteer abroad. The programme is addressed to institutions and organisations operating in the area of education, training, youth and sport in Europe (Erasmus plus Programme Guide, 2015: 8-9).

The Erasmus + programme has been divided into sectors covering school education, vocational training, higher education, adult education, youth, central projects and sport. What is more, the programme covers three main types of actions in each sector: 1. Mobility for educational purposes – the largest project in terms of scope, 2. Cooperation and exchange of good practices as well as international initiatives, and 3. Support of reforms in the area of education, with the first two actions being decentralised and conducted by the National Agencies. In addition to the actions, some sectors include additional activities, like the adult learning sector also includes a multilingual, open electronic membership-based platform for teachers, instructors, researchers, academics, policy

makers and anyone professionally involved in adult learning in Europe called EPALE. The platform is to facilitate sharing resources, courses, events as well as the improvement of the quality of adult learning provision in Europe.

As a general rule, Erasmus + projects are addressed to participants including individuals called participants and participating organisations established in a Programme Country. Programme Countries can fully participate in the programme. Some actions of the Programme are also addressed to Partner Countries, subject to specific criteria and conditions specified in the Programme Guide.

The tables below present a list of Programme Countries and Partner Countries (Erasmus + Programme Guide for 2015: 24).

Table 1. Programme Countries

Member States of the European Union (EU)			
Belgium	Greece	Lithuania	Portugal
Bulgaria	Spain	Luxembourg	Romania
Czech Republic	France	Hungary	Slovenia
Denmark	Croatia	Malta	Slovakia
Germany	Italy	Netherlands	Finland
Estonia	Cyprus	Austria	Sweden
Ireland	Latvia	Poland	United Kingdom
Non-EU Programme Countries			
Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Iceland Liechtenstein Norway Turkey			

It is worth noticing that Partner Countries are subdivided into two groups: Partner Countries neighbouring the EU and other Partner Countries, with the former meeting the same eligibility criteria implemented through the Erasmus + Programme Guide and formulated in the Commission Notice (OJEU C-205: 9-11), and the latter regrouped according to the financial instruments of the EU external action (Regions 5 - 13).

Table 2. Partner Countries neighbouring the EU

Western Balkans (Region 1)	Eastern Partnership countries (Region 2)	South-Mediterranean countries (Region 3)	Russian Federation (Region 4)
• Albania • Bosnia and Herzegovina • Kosovo • Montenegro • Serbia	• Armenia • Azerbaijan • Belarus • Georgia • Moldova • Territory of Ukraine as recognised by international law	• Algeria • Egypt • Israel • Jordan • Lebanon • Libya • Morocco • Palestine • Syria • Tunisia	• Territory of Russia as recognised by international law

Actions in order to meet market expectations and reduce unemployment

The report published by Eurydice *Key Data on Education in Europe 2012* shows that young people's entry into the labour market is a concern in many countries, with a growing number of young people to be overqualified for the type of employment they find. On the other hand, high risk of being unemployed and marginalised is run mainly by young people leaving school prematurely and adults with low skills. This situation implies both a need for a more efficient forecast process aiming at more reliable educational guidance so that educational qualifications could match actual employment opportunities, and a need for measures to prevent early school leaving and to reach unskilled or low-skilled adults in order to provide them with the skills in demand on the market. Only well-performing education

and training systems can help tackle the challenges by providing people with the skills required by the labour market and the economy, while allowing them to play an active role in society and achieve personal fulfilment (Key Data on Education in Europe, 2012: 11).

Although there are no official data summarising the results of actions undertaken so far under the Erasmus + programme, it may be assumed, based on careful analysis of the Lifelong Learning Programme, that mobility projects significantly contribute to the improvement of linguistic skills, the development of all types of soft skills raising multicultural awareness and tolerance. Hence, mobility, which is a top-priority project within the Erasmus +, affects not only the personal development of a beneficiary, but also raises individuals' chances on the labour market. For a large group of beneficiaries, e.g. students or graduates, a stay abroad to study, do traineeship or attend a language course is the first chance to be exposed to the real language and be totally immersed in the foreign-language setting, to check actual language skills and to use the language for real communication, not the one used in the classroom. It is worth mentioning that Erasmus + also helps increase the language skills and the multicultural competences of academic personnel, which, in the light of demographic changes and uncertainty of employment at higher education institutions, may in the long run strongly affect the position of academics on the market.

Although Erasmus + is a continuation of previous programmes, including the abovementioned Lifelong Learning programme, it introduces some vital changes resulting from the EU strategy ('EU 2020'). It introduces a new possibility of stays abroad oriented at gaining professional experience. Universities participating in the programme offer not only stays for study but also professional traineeship abroad lasting at least two months addressed to fresh graduates helping

them find themselves on the labour market and have a good start. Another novelty of Erasmus + is a tool OLS (Online Linguistic Support), which allows Erasmus + beneficiaries to assess their language skills before going abroad, and if the language skills of a person are insufficient, the tool enables the beneficiary to participate in an online language course before leaving for a stay abroad. It is a requirement under Erasmus + that every beneficiary has to take a language test before leaving and after comeback, with the aim being to check how mobility affects language skills.

Actions in order to increase efficiency of education systems

Raising efficiency of educational systems is one of the key elements determining the success in coping with educational challenges in Europe. Changing circumstances, including the internationalisation of education and the growing use of digital learning require more flexible learning pathways adapted to learners' needs and objectives as well as innovative solutions. Changing reality poses a need to upgrade education systems in order to use their full potential. First, there is a need for uniform and transparent recognition tools which will assure easy understanding of skills and qualification within the EU internal market. Second, new technologies should be adapted to the way society operates and, in this way, used more effectively. Last but not least, there is a need to share and disseminate best practices among Member States and all stakeholders, as this will accelerate the progress of others by setting good examples of practice.

The internationalisation of education systems contributes to their higher efficiency. Erasmus + emphasises a strong international dimension, in particular in the field of higher education and youth. It is worth noting that most actions in the field of higher education and youth are also open to Erasmus + Partner Countries. Actions with international dimension involve cooperation with Partner Countries and include the following actions: International credit mobility

and Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees (Key Action 1) which aims at promoting the mobility of learners and staff, Capacity Building (Key Action 2) promoting cooperation and partnerships affecting the modernisation and internationalisation of higher education institutions in Partner Countries, and Policy Dialogue (Key Action 3) consisting in cooperation within the network of higher education reform experts in Partner Countries, international activities and promotion events. A similar structure of activities is promoted in the field of youth, and they include mobility for young people and youth workers (Key Action 1) promoting Youth Exchanges and European Voluntary Service, Capacity Building (Key Action, 2) promoting cooperation and mobility affecting qualitative development of youth work, youth policies and youth systems, as well as Structured Dialogues (Key Action 3) aiming to involve young people and youth organisations from Partner Countries neighbouring the EU through international meetings, conferences and events. The multitude of actions initiated by the EU designed to internationalise education not only proves the significance of this aspect in the light of the efficiency of domestic education systems, but also shows that although the internationalisation of education has already become a reality, there are still many areas to be improved (Erasmus Plus Programme Guide, 2015: 12).

Recognition and transparency tools encourage wider cooperation between education systems and through that affect their efficiency. Erasmus + supports EU tools which guarantee transparency and recognition for skills and qualifications, such as *Europass, Youthpass, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)*, as well as EU-wide networks supporting such tools, an example being Euroguidance networks or EQF National Coordination Points. For instance, the European Qualifications Framework is a translation tool aimed at helping communication and comparison between qualification systems in Europe. The tool is based on eight

levels which are used by learners, graduates and employers for understanding and comparing qualifications awarded in different countries and by different education systems. Such tools also help better understand the labour market in view of expected qualifications. As a result, these tools help reach the education targets of ET 2020 and contribute to Europe 2020 objectives concerning competitiveness, employment and growth.

Last but not least, the efficiency of education systems is also enhanced by mobility. Erasmus + is an opportunity for transnational mobility for educational purposes for pupils, students, teachers, and supports building partnerships between universities, secondary schools, enterprises and non-profit organisations in order to strengthen innovations and build knowledge. Universities employing teachers or academic personnel having multicultural and multilingual skills are more attractive to potential students also from abroad. The mobility of university employees translates into the development of the university and, in turn, strengthens the position of a university in the region or even on the international stage. Mobility contributes to raising the efficiency of education systems as it allows taking advantage of observing and participating in education systems of other participating countries. Beneficiaries of the programme after their comeback to the homeland often take initiatives based on the experiences from their stay abroad.

Exchange of good practices According to the main assumptions of Erasmus +, the outcomes and deliverables of the projects carried out within the programme should be communicated, and, thanks to that the impact of such projects, extended. The results achieved in particular projects may be highly relevant in fields not directly related to the project. The proper dissemination of project results requires the adoption of appropriate activities of the organisations involved while designing and

implementing the project. Moreover, Erasmus + promotes open access to educational materials produced by projects funded by the programme. By principle, the materials should be freely available to the public in digital form.

The University of Warsaw is a very good example of an institution sharing best practices. The University has already been honoured by the European Commission and the Polish National Agency – the Foundation for the Development of the Education System – for its innovative solutions. The University received the title Erasmus Success Story for the years 2000-2006 granted by the Commission for being a leader in educational mobility. The Bureau for International Cooperation at the University created IT USOS, a system used for mobility management, which was later adopted and is still used by other Polish universities. In the light of the fast-growing number of students and academic personnel benefiting from the programme – to compare, in 1999 there were 23 Erasmus students at the University, and in 2015, there are 1500 students going abroad to study or do traineeship. 300 teachers going abroad and about 800 incoming students and teachers – the efficient management of mobility would not be possible without the system.

After the first year of implementation – The experience of the University of Warsaw
The reflections and conclusions regarding the first year of Erasmus + implementation presented in this paper refer to the sector of higher education and are based on the experiences of the Bureau for International Cooperation at the University of Warsaw (Interview with the Head of the Bureau held on 28 September 2015). At the University, mobility is the largest and the most important project out of all actions covered by Erasmus +. It affects the largest group of beneficiaries, students and teachers, academic staff or University employees. From the point of view of a higher education institution, the programme is not perfect. Especially at the early stages of its implementation there was much disorder as regards the

requirements imposed by the EU. When Brussels imposed extremely strict conditions, the EU officials did not comply with some rules, failed to provide fully developed and tested tools which were to be used. To give an example, the mobility tool was not properly prepared, information about the OLS system was provided late, and licences were granted to education institutions at the time when beneficiaries had already gone abroad. Still, after one year and a half since the launch of the programme there are matters which have not be clarified in the EU guidelines, e.g. a method of calculating remuneration for the personnel working in the project. A daily fee amounts to 37 Euro in Poland and despite raising a lot of objections, the issue has not been solved to date.

Initially, there was also much confusion concerning a matter of taxing individual support which caused education institutions to wait with the implementation of the mobility project. As late as in August 2015, a regulation on the abandonment to impose income tax was issued by the minister of finance, which means that for more than a year there was a gap in regulations regarding the fundamental matter of financial settlements with the tax office. During that period plenty of questions on how Erasmus + funds should be paid out remained unanswered. Although on 20 December 2013 the European Parliament issued the Regulation encouraging Member States to exempt Erasmus + beneficiaries from tax, the decision remained within the competences of Member States. In Poland only after active campaigns, the engagement of the Conference of Rectors of Academic Schools (KRASP), and the pressure exerted on the Foundation for the Development of the Education System – the National Agency of the Erasmus + Programme – and the Ministry of Education,, were tax issues related to the financial support within Erasmus + finally settled. Clearly, the lack of transparency resulted in a lower number of applications submitted in the period between 1 January 2014 and 31 December 2014. No-

tice should be also taken of the fact that the current Polish regulation is effective until the end of 2016 and it is not clear how tax will be settled afterwards. Moreover, the regulation has some gaps as it does not specify if social insurance contributions should be paid, and interpretations of the Polish National Social Institution are ambiguous.

Based on the example of the University of Warsaw, it must be stated that the first months of the programme implementation seemed to be challenging. Yet, the brand Erasmus is already so known in Europe that it is certain that it will not discourage anyone from taking advantage of the programme in the future.

Conclusions
1. The EU institutions contribute to the development of education systems acting within their limited competences and have mainly guiding role.
2. The initiatives of the EU in the field of education include the Bologna process, Eurydice network and the Erasmus + programme.
3. The Erasmus + programme (2014-2020) is a comprehensive programme replacing all previous EU education programmes and with its scope covering many groups of beneficiaries.
4. Erasmus + was created in order to face the educational challenges of Europe. As the previous programme it continues to promote language learning, but it also includes new elements which serve for coping with the current European problems such as demographic changes, the adaptation of education systems to the labour market and the expectations of employers as well the high unemployment rate among young and unskilled people.
5. So as to meet the expectations of the labour market, Erasmus + strongly promotes mobility not only to study, but also to do professional traineeship. In order to make mobility more effective, the EU launches a new tool, OLS,

which serves for the assessment of language progress after a stay abroad.

6. The programme introduces a number of initiatives aimed at the internationalisation of the education systems, including Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees, Capacity Building or Policy Dialogue.

7. A lot of attention is paid to the introduction of recognition tools and transparency as well as to the exchange of good practices, which should contribute to the higher efficiency of the education systems of the participating countries.

8. The first year of the programme implementation shows a number of deficiencies both on the part of the EU and the Member State – based on the example of the University of Warsaw.

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