



# Overcoming the Barriers of Mobility: Higher Education in the EU-LAC Regions *Policy Brief*

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## **Executive Summary**

In 1999, the European Union and Latin American and the Caribbean (EU-LAC) Heads of States declared Higher Education (HE) a strategic area of interest in the Declaration of Rio de Janeiro. Since then, cooperation in HE has expanded. The Erasmus programme evolved into the Erasmus+ Programme in 2014 widening its focus from the EU to other regions such as LAC. A key component of HE cooperation and Erasmus+ is the facilitation of mobility between the two regions for students, professors, and researchers. This policy brief explores how to further improve mobility in HE within Erasmus+. The goal is to contribute and strengthen EU-LAC bilateral cooperation by providing recommendations for policy makers in both regions on how to further ease mobility for participants in Erasmus+ resulting in a more inclusive and efficient HE cooperation. Through literature reviews and semi-structured interviews with students and stakeholders inside and outside the Erasmus+ Programme from both regions, the policy brief identifies three main areas that hindered mobility: 1) The Institutional Framework, 2) Financial Constraints; and 3) Language Requirements.

## **The Current State of the Erasmus+ Programme**

In 1987, the Erasmus programme was created to promote the mobility of skilled students in Higher Education (HE) within Europe. In 2014, the programme extended to Erasmus+ with the purpose to become more global and more integrated (Vassiliou, 2014). The Erasmus+ Programme intended to streamline the architecture of the international HE programmes in the EU, merging all existing initiatives into a single programme. The objectives of the new Erasmus+ Programme focus on learning mobility of individuals and groups and at the same time promote equity, cooperation, and inclusion (European Commission, 2021).

Erasmus+ is not only limited to traditional study abroad exchange programmes but also includes the creation of many international degree programmes (the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master), sundry international partnerships, and a wide range of research activities (Jibeen & Khan, 2015). In general, the scope of internationalisation and cooperation of HE has increased and evolved over the years, driven partly by the digitisation of education (Chan, 2004).

The benefits of this cooperation are manifold. Cross-cultural understanding enhances, foreign language skills improve, and other personal skills are developed (Marciniak & Winnicki, 2019; Allinson & Gabriels, 2021). Furthermore, cooperation and internationalisation allow for knowledge exchange and as Jibeen & Khan (2015) argue should improve the overall academic quality. In addition, study abroad programmes according to Potts (2015) have a great benefit for the early stages of the career as well as an increased passion and motivation for one's career direction.

## **Erasmus+ and LAC**

Through Erasmus+ the focus and cooperation in HE has expanded to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). However, already in a bi-regional dialogue in 1999, HE was considered a strategic area of interest and in 2000 ministers from both regions launched a HE project that later became known as EU-CELAC Common Area of HE. The goal of the project was to fulfil a series of objectives "in areas such as accreditation of HE programmes, transfer of credits, student and academic mobility, and the recognition of diplomas by 2015" (Barlete, 2020, p. 1).

This cooperation is supported by organisations like the EU-LAC Foundation, which has one of their six interconnected lines of action works on HE by creating space for dialogue and knowledge between the regions. While progress has been made in the past 20 years, many of the challenges remain.

The Erasmus+ Programme counts on a budget of more than 24 billion EUR for the period from 2021-2027. This is included in the overall EU budget and administered by the European Commission. Additionally, another 1.7 billion EUR were added in 2018 leading to a budget of over 26 billion. Nearly doubling the funding compared to its predecessor programme (2014-2020) with 4 million beneficiaries. Of the new budget, 20% will go to non-European countries (European Commission, 2021).

The evaluation of the first Erasmus+ Programme showed that about 5% of the funding went to Latin American countries and significantly less to the Caribbean (European Commission, 2019). The LAC region countries are not associates of the programme but partners. As partners they are subject to specific criteria and limitations that do not apply to associates. Associates are mainly EU Member States and some third countries. Thus, many of the existing programmes are not available to the region and international mobility activities to any non-associated country are financed from the grant awarded to mobility projects.

## Methodology

The methodology followed in this research included two steps. The first step involved an extensive literature review of official reports and academic publications related to Erasmus+ and the existing barriers to mobility between the EU-LAC regions. The second step entailed the conduct of semi-structured interviews with students and stakeholders listed in *Table 1*. In total, nine individuals were interviewed between December 2021 and January 2022<sup>1</sup>. The aim was to conduct interviews with two groups of students: participants and non-participants in the Erasmus+ Programme, not only to further understand the barriers to mobility, but also to portray the vision of the young generation.

Table 1. Profile of the interviewees.

N°	Perspective	Sending country	Receiving country	Programme	Date	Format
<i>Interviewee 1</i>	Student	México	Germany	Short-term mobility	Jan. 11, 2022	Video-calls
<i>Interviewee 2</i>	Student	Argentina	Italy	Short-term mobility	Jan. 5, 2022	Video-calls
<i>Interviewee 3</i>	Student	Ecuador	France	Traineeship for Young Professionals	Dec. 22, 2022	Video-calls

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<i>Interviewee 4</i>	Student	Ecuador	England	Short-term mobility	Jan. 11, 2022	Video-calls
<i>Interviewee 5</i>	Student	Perú	Unsuccessful application	Erasmus Mundus	Dec. 17, 2021	Video-calls
<i>Interviewee 6</i>	Student	Ecuador	Unsuccessful applications	Non-Erasmus+ Programme	Jan. 7, 2022	Video-calls
<i>Interviewee 7</i>	Erasmus Mundus Representative	Ecuador	N/A	N/A	Jan. 14, 2022	Video-calls
<i>Interviewee 8</i>	Erasmus Mundus Representative	Ecuador	N/A	N/A	Jan. 14, 2022	Video-calls
<i>Interviewee 9</i>	Erasmus+ Representative	EU	N/A	N/A	Jan. 14, 2022	Video-calls

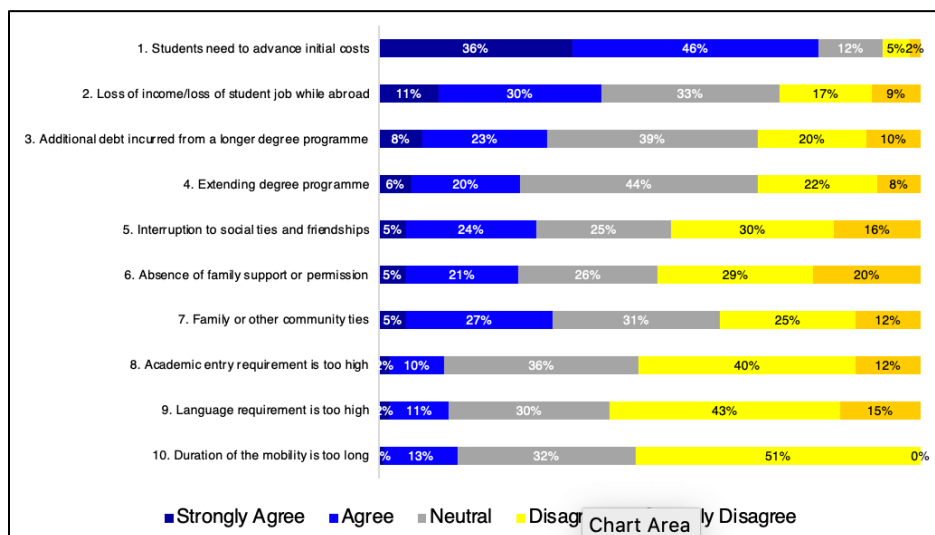
Furthermore, the authors interviewed stakeholders; one Erasmus+ representative from the European Commission and two Erasmus Mundus representatives for Ecuador. After the transcription, we analysed the interviews through a narrative analysis which helped us to narrow down the key problem areas. The policy recommendations are based on the interviewees ideas and our own literature research. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, the research missed its target of also interviewing European students that went or wanted to go to LAC for their mobility.

## **Problem**

The benefits that mobility experiences offer are reflected in the personal and professional opportunities that Erasmus+ leave to students. However, there are still gaps of inclusion and accessibility to the programme, hampering that more students can participate in the programme. These gaps are often related to the socio-economic status and academic background of students and are problematic as they limit the accessibility to mobility programmes. A survey conducted by the Social Inclusion & Engagement in Mobility (SiEM), part of the Erasmus Network, asked 12, 820 participants about the major barriers they faced in their mobility (see results in Figure 1). The majority of barriers stem from financial aspects, followed by what we call in this policy brief the institutional framework (issues related to degree programmes and credits). Additionally, interviewees stressed the language requirements as a challenge for their mobility. Lastly, the interviewees from the LAC region emphasised to ease the visa procedures as they found it very difficult to deal with.

Despite the expansion of Erasmus+ and its heavily increased budget, the programme applicants and participants struggle to be part of the mobility experiences, which diminish its aims to construct a stronger association on HE cooperation within and between the EU-LAC countries. From the assessment of previous academic research and based on the experiences of our interviewees we can identify three key problem areas related to mobility: 1) the institutional framework; 2) financial constraints; and 3) language requirements, that are analysed in the following sections.

Table 1. Barriers to Mobility.



Source: Allinson, K., & Gabriels, W. (2021). *Maybe it will be different abroad: student and staff perspectives on diversity and inclusion in student exchanges*. SIEM Research Report, 136.

### The Institutional Framework

Erasmus+ is considered the largest mobility student exchange scheme for HE in Europe and the flagship programme of the EU. In order to participate in the programme, universities have to sign a charter whereby they agree to waive tuition fees for exchange students and that credits obtained at the host university are to be recognised through the signing of a learning agreement between all three parties (home and host institutions and the student) (Souto-Otero et al., 2013).

Despite these efforts, mobility still reaches only a minority of HE’s students because of issues related to the institutional framework in the bi-regional cooperation in HE. In our research, the institutional framework refers to the asymmetries between the EU-LAC regions regarding entry requirements to a European country as a student and the recognition of credits and academic degrees by Higher Education Institutions (HEI’s) obtained abroad.

Obtaining a visa to study in Europe is a severe challenge that students face. The lack of knowledge about the visa process and the little support by the sending institutions act as a limitation for students to meet the necessary requirements. According to the experience of *Interviewee 2*:

*“Mainly students are on their own...It would have been nice if the university would have guided and supported us. And during the visa stuff, it’s not easy to get a visa and people really get frustrated because of that. I think university could help us with the visa process...”*

Furthermore, mobility still reaches only a minority of HE’s students due to various issues related to the institutional framework. This includes problems of accreditation for students who either move from one country to another for a full degree, or for credit mobility, spending just a short-time period. Students face difficulties finding appropriate institutions and/or study programmes abroad. They struggle with the recognition of their credits at their home institutions due to a lack of integration/continuity between study programmes at home and abroad. As can be seen by *Interviewee 1*:

*“For me, the biggest challenge was to validate the courses that I am taking here. I think that the biggest problem is that in Mexico, we have like five years of college<sup>2</sup>. And here in Europe, you only have three. So, I’m in my last year of college. So basically, here in Europe, I’m a master’s student.”*

## **Financial Constraints**

All the students and stakeholders interviewed put financial constraints as the main reasons that hamper student mobility between the European Union and Latin American and Caribbean countries. On one hand, in the LAC region, there are mainly middle-income countries while the EU members are mostly developed economies. This has resulted in a significant difference in the cost of living and income between the EU-LAC regions, and within the countries of the EU as well.

Comparing the cost of living between home and receiving countries could represent an exponential increase and investment in student mobility. For students, it is very challenging to afford expenses such as; language preparation, translation of certificates and academic documents, visa fees, accommodation, etc. Most of the students interviewed stated that without a scholarship or any financial support, they could not study in Europe since they and their relatives do not have the possibility to fully afford the expenses of studying outside their home countries. For example, *Interviewee 4* from Ecuador said:

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<sup>2</sup> The interviewee named “college” to refer to the five-years study of Chemical Engineering in Mexico. This excerpt makes reference to the possibility to complete a Bachelor and a Master programme in the same time frame in Europe.

*“I think that the financial issue is definitely an obstacle, totally. I believe that it results in an impediment, because many families are not able to support their children during six-months in a foreign country”.*

Studying abroad represents a big challenge for students and their families. Applicants consider the funding opportunities offered by Erasmus+ programmes, for example, as the only possibility to study outside their home countries. *Interviewee 5* from Peru stated that what she expected from Erasmus+ was:

*“...the money to finance my studies... Money is one of my main motivations. The issue of money because I saw it as almost impossible to go outside without a scholarship...”*

Based on the interviews and the research developed, programmes such as Erasmus Mundus are very generous with the benefited students. The scholarships awarded can even cover visa fees or university registration fees. *Interviewees 7 & 8* corresponding to the Erasmus Mundus Representatives for Ecuador remarked that this programme, besides providing full scholarships, it could give the option of self-financing. This option could allow a student to undertake their studies abroad if he/she have a student loan or they could afford such expenses. *Interviewee 8* said:

*“...there are hundreds of applicants to the same scholarships, so the best profiles are chosen. Once the slots are covered and if the University still finds the applicant profile very interesting, they could say that there is no scholarship available, but the student could self-fund his/her studies.”*

Currently, the social and economic crisis resulting from the pandemic has affected millions of students and has compromised their continuation in HE around the world. Despite the different public and private efforts such as scholarships, stipends, grants and funding offered to students, education systems and HE institutions have been challenged to show more adaptability and resilience amid the sanitary emergency. These challenges cannot be addressed without an economic support approach, as financial limitations are determinant to the exchange of cultural and human capital between both regions.

The current funding opportunities offered through Erasmus+ programmes such as: Erasmus Mundus; Erasmus Training for Young Professionals; and the short-term mobility programmes have been crucial for promoting bi-regional student mobility. As pointed out by our interviewees, through Erasmus+ students gained: friends; academic knowledge; internships; networks; a broader perspective to understand people and their cultures; and working opportunities. Besides improving the dissemination



of the different funding options when considering applying to Erasmus+ programmes, student mobility in HE requires more efforts from both regions to continue financially supporting students who wish and could not undertake their studies in HE institutions outside their home countries.

### **Language Requirements Constraints**

In order to participate in Erasmus+, students must have the necessary foreign language skills. For most applicants coming to Europe the relevant language is English and usually a B2 or C1 level and a TOEFL score of 90-100 is required. The interviews with the students we conducted demonstrated that language is one of their main barriers when it comes to mobility. *Interviewee 5* from Peru stated:

*“The biggest challenge for me was the language. It took me a long time to achieve the minimum required, which for some universities was 100 in the TOEFL. And I took a long time to apply because I did not achieve the minimum score. So, in the end, I applied when I got 90. And I said I am going to apply only to universities that ask me for 90”.*

Similarly, a representative of the Erasmus Mundus Programme in Ecuador said:

*“The biggest challenge, for an applicant, is English.”*

The interviews reflected a discrepancy between students who are/were enrolled at public and private institutions in some countries in the LAC region. Generally, those attending private institutions were less likely to face language as a barrier than those students who went through the public education system.

That language might serve as a barrier for LAC students is not very surprising if one looks at the English proficiency in Latin America. According to the English Proficiency Index 2021 (*Table 2*), only Argentina has a high proficiency, with most countries having moderate to very low proficiency levels. Based on the score ranging from 1-800 obtained in a Standard English Test, the test takers language abilities are classified into one of the six levels established by Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR):



Table 3: Global ranking of countries and regions.

<b>Latin America</b>		
<b>Rank</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Score</b>
30	Argentina	556
41	Bolivia	524
43	Cuba	521
44	Costa Rica	520
44	Dominican Republic	520
44	Paraguay	520
47	Chile	516
53	Uruguay	509
54	El Salvador	508
55	Honduras	506
56	Peru	505
60	Brazil	497
61	Guatemala	493
73	Panama	475
73	Venezuela	475
76	Nicaragua	470
81	Colombia	465
90	Ecuador	440
92	Mexico	436
105	Haiti	403

Source: EF English Proficiency Index.

These findings corroborate the findings presented by Ballatore & Ferede (2013) that students who participate in the Erasmus programme are disproportionately more privileged than their counterparts. While building a community of excellent scholars might be a goal of Erasmus+, requirements like language proficiency, although important might undermine the programme's objective of being inclusive. Besides the financial aspect, the likelihood of participating in Erasmus+ is directly linked to prior education and international study and travel experience, which particularly serves as a constraint as one applies for a study programme with a different language. Thus, language notably in the LAC region is an obstacle that fosters unequal opportunities and hence goes against the aim of Erasmus+ to be an inclusive programme.

## Recommendations

Table 4. Summary of policy recommendations.

Policy Issue	Recommendations
<b>The Institutional Framework</b>	New students starting their mobility process should be put in contact with the alumni of the respective mobility programme.
	The EU-LAC Foundation should further promote a dialogue to a to discuss the challenges related to degree and credit recognition that fosters convergence of these issues.
<b>Financial Constraints</b>	More dialogue spaces should be created by representatives of Erasmus+ and representatives of LAC governments to create understanding and more commitment of the LAC region for investing and promoting student mobility as the EU.
	Erasmus+ programmes should create partial scholarships to be covered by Erasmus+ and by the beneficiary through a fixed percentage.
<b>Language Requirements</b>	Investment and support for foreign language teaching in public education institutions prior to HE should be enhanced.
	Mobility exchanges should amplify language learning opportunities prior to the official start of the studies.

### 1. Recommendations to improve the Institutional Framework

**Developing Links for new Students:** New students starting their mobility process should be put in contact with the alumni of the respective mobility programme. Organisations like the Erasmus+ Students and Alumni Alliance (ESAA) should be engaged in this through different projects supported by the EU-LAC Foundation. This should help improve the insufficient support system, particularly LAC students complain about.

**EU-LAC Reflection Forum:** As part of European Union (EU)–Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) contributions to the bi-regional strategic partnership, EU-LAC Foundation should organise a forum to discuss the challenges related to degree and credit recognition. Two specific measures should be discussed at the forum:

1. Expanding the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) to include the LAC region to function as a translation tool to make national qualifications easier to understand and more comparable.

2. The creation of an independent agency funded by governments from both the EU-LAC region. In this agency, government representatives should work harmonising HE standards in the two regions and thereby developing more effective frameworks of recognition of credits.

## 2. Recommendations to improve the Financial Constrains

**Dialogue building between representatives of Erasmus+ and representatives of LAC governments:** The budget to promote student mobility to and from LAC countries within the Erasmus+ Programme has roughly doubled for the period 2021-2027. In this point, the policy proposal is the creation of dialogue spaces between representatives of the Erasmus+ Programme and LAC governments, in order to create understanding and more commitment of the LAC region to invest and promote student mobility as its counterpart. The funding of research projects in science and technology, the investment in infrastructure and study tools and supplies should be assured for the development of student mobility in HE. These spaces for dialogue could be institutionalised, where the government's representatives share the progress and achievements of their countries annually.

**Creation of partial scholarships:** Due to the scarce resources allocated for student mobility between the two regions, the number of Erasmus+ beneficiaries has been reduced, making it necessary to improve the existing programmes and scholarships. The policy recommendation is to create partial scholarships that could be covered through a fixed percentage by Erasmus+ and by the beneficiary. Currently, the scholarships awarded in the Erasmus Mundus programme, for example, do not satisfy the demand of qualified applicants. This type of partial scholarships could increase the number of beneficiaries and, in turn, generate joint responsibility where the students could access, HE abroad and improve the cooperation status for student mobility between the EU-LAC regions.

## 3. Recommendations to overcome Language Barriers

**Supporting foreign language teaching prior to HE:** More funding and other tools should be made available to enhance foreign language teaching in the LAC region. Principally, the public education system should be targeted, as those who have visited a private institution are much less likely to face language as a constraint. Such a support programme should already be implemented in the public education system prior to the university level. While the LAC region has been improving its English proficiency level, the level remains fairly low and thus forms a constraint for a large part of the society.

**Increase the scope of language courses prior to the exchange:** Prior to the official start of the studies students that fulfil all the requirements, but the language one, should have the chance to arrive at their host university or country a few months earlier and take part in intensive language courses.

Some universities already offer such services, but increasing the scope of such initiatives to cover all exchange programmes and not charging the students for the course would be a vital step in further curbing language requirements as an obstacle to mobility. The language training as part of the scholarship programme of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) could serve as a role model for Erasmus+.

## **The Authors**

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