

Complementary note to EUA's membership consultation and recommendations for the future of the Erasmus+ programme

Erasmus + Mid-term evaluation: Grants for Refugee Students and Scholars, Masters' Loan Guarantee Scheme and the Bologna Experts Scheme

31 May 2017

The present paper complements the European University Association's (EUA) response to the EC's online questionnaire for the Open Public Consultation on the mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ Programme, the report based on EUA's [membership consultation](#)¹ (December 2016) and the resulting set of [Recommendations](#)² (February 2017).

One of the recommendations – Nr. 8 – proposes to establish a Grant for Refugee Students and Scholars. EUA would like to provide further explanation for this specific recommendation. In addition, EUA would like to express its views on the Masters' Loan Guarantee Scheme and the Bologna Experts Scheme – which had not been addressed in EUA's previous statements.

1. Explanatory note on the Recommendation on a Erasmus+ Grant for Refugee Students and Scholars

EUA's Recommendation Nr. 8 refers to “flexibility to respond to emerging challenges, such as support for refugee students and staff.” It proposes “to establish a specific support action for refugee students and academics, not only in third countries, but also in the programme countries,” and concluded: “Taking part in Erasmus+ mobility would turn refugees into international students and academics, giving them better prospects for integration and careers in their country of origin, as well as in Europe. It would also allow better dissemination among different member states and universities and enhance their international cooperation and networking, as well as create long-term social and economic benefits. In addition, these measures would set an example and raise awareness for the situation of refugees, both in Europe and internationally.”

EUA would like to add the following explanatory points:

1. While for any person threats to civic rights, health and life can be reason to leave their country, students and scholars are among those likely to suffer from persecution, due to involvement in research, and their dependence on academic freedom and autonomy. Some become officially refugees, others seek ways to become “international” students and scholars, so the dark figure would be higher than any official number.

¹ EUA 2016. EUA MEMBER CONSULTATION A CONTRIBUTION TO THE ERASMUS+ MID-TERM REVIEW. Available online: <http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications-homepage-list/eua-membership-consultation-2016-mid-term-review-of-erasmus.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

² EUA 2017. ERASMUS+ MID-TERM REVIEW: EUA'S RECOMMENDATIONS. Available online: <http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications-homepage-list/erasmus-recommendations.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

2. Academic solidarity organisations, such as Scholars at Risk, the Scholars Rescue Fund, and CARA report a steep increase in the number of academics seeking refuge in Europe and other parts of the world, compared to one or two decades ago. This is also due to the fact that higher education has expanded around the world, and in particular in third world countries, many of them with weak democracies.
3. For young people, becoming a refugee is often synonymous with missing out on education. This is particularly evident for students or potential students in higher education, as intervention in host countries, reception centres or camps often focuses only on the provision of primary and secondary education. A [2016 UNHCR report](#) points to the fact that only 1% of refugees have access to higher education. Missing out on education has a long-term impact, not only for the individuals, but also the communities and the societies they live in.
4. As universities are under pressure to internationalise, and welcome international staff and students, this presents a clear opportunity for both the refugees and the host institutions. Their inclusion not only enhances the economic, professional and social prospects of the individual, but also their ability to contribute to their host communities, or their community of origin.
5. [Data collected by EUA](#) suggests that universities all over Europe already support refugees. Apart from legal status and language issues, what prevents more institutions from hosting more refugee students and scholars is the lack of financial support. A few governments provide funding, but European universities usually have to rely on their own resources.
6. A number of governmental and non-governmental organisations around the world provide targeted support to refugee staff and students, for instance in Canada, and a few EU countries, and the US, which takes them in as international students. But there is no real European-wide initiative.
7. An Erasmus+ grant scheme could help to improve the situation for refugee students and staff, their hosting institutions, and also contribute to the international visibility and standing of the EU.

2. Reinforcement of the Bologna Experts and Coordinators

EUA calls for a reestablishment of the Bologna Experts in all Programme countries, and a systematic exchange and cooperation with the HERE in partner countries. This could support the current reform priorities, such as the enhancement of learning and teaching (including digitalisation), which require close collaboration between governments, the higher education sector and other stakeholders.

For almost a decade, Bologna Experts (previously Bologna Promoters and ECTS counsellors) have been a crucial resource for the dissemination and implementation of European reforms, but also for their further development. They provided an important link between policy and practice levels, within their countries and across borders, and have been drivers and multipliers for national and institutional higher education development in line with agreed European policy principles and instruments. It is very difficult to imagine the implementation of the three-cycle system, ECTS, learning outcomes and also institutional and national QA approaches without the support of the Bologna Experts.

With the arrival of Erasmus+ in 2014, the funding mechanism for the Bologna Experts has been changed: only a few Member States applied for funding, and continue to have National Bologna Teams. Hence, the Bologna Experts have become a rather fragmented initiative, which is no longer used in all Programme countries.

By contrast, in the 26 countries of the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood the previous scheme has been continued and is operated successfully under the name “[Higher Education Reform Experts](#)” (HERE, formerly: Tempus experts).

3. Masters’ Loan Guarantee Scheme

EUA calls for a thorough and impartial assessment of the Masters’ Loan Guarantee Scheme (MLGS). As it principally welcomes the intention to enhance cross-border degree mobility, this should also include the consideration of an alternative scheme, e.g. through a trust fund.

Its implementation so far has been slow, and there is some indication that this is not just due to the lead-time needed to develop and promote it, but that the MLGS has serious shortcomings. As the scheme is not attractive enough for banks, the European Investment Fund (EIF) and the EC have now started to offer universities to become financial intermediaries. So far only five banks and one university in six countries have agreed to get involved.

EUA is concerned that the scheme will result in relatively high bureaucratic efforts and costs for the universities and students, with no real added value. Depending on the country, universities might not be able to defer payments, either for legal reasons, or because there are no tuition fees. In some countries, the scheme would not be able to compete with existing national portable loan and grant systems. Given the patchy take up, the scheme is unlikely to develop into a truly European instrument.

EUA therefore calls for an assessment by a team of independent experts, from both higher education and finance backgrounds. As the idea to have additional mobility schemes, and to enable Masters’ mobility throughout Europe is still welcome in principle, EUA invites the European Commission to consider an alternative approach to the present MLGS, e.g. the establishment of a European trust fund, which would provide grants instead of loans.

Various different approaches for selection (excellence, need, study in thematic priority areas, etc.) would be possible. If successful, it could also be extended to Bachelor or PhD level.

The target of the Masters Loan Scheme is to finance an estimated 200 000 student loans until 2020 (loans between 12 000 and 18 000 EUR). Alternatively, the 520 million EUR would fund about 34 666 full scholarships with an average value of 15 000 EUR. Since January 2013, the new Financial Regulation applicable to the EU budget (Article 187 of the Financial Regulation), allows the European Commission to create and administer EU Trust Funds in the field of external action, which are multi-donor trust funds for emergency or thematic actions.

Annex I

For further information, including the findings of a consultation conducted amongst universities on Erasmus+, as well as concrete recommendations for the next programme generation, please refer to the following sources:

EUA 2016. EUA MEMBER CONSULTATION A CONTRIBUTION TO THE ERASMUS+ MID-TERM REVIEW. Available online: <http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications-homepage-list/eua-membership-consultation-2016-mid-term-review-of-erasmus.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

EUA 2017. ERASMUS+ MID-TERM REVIEW: EUA'S RECOMMENDATIONS. Available online: <http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications-homepage-list/erasmus-recommendations.pdf?sfvrsn=2>