

Submission 3.1 HEA- International Education

Introduction

The National Agency welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process for the next National Access Plan (2022-2026). The NA is very pleased to note the commitment in the Consultation Paper that “an inclusive higher education system is a national and European priority”.

The new Erasmus+ Programme 2021, which supports student and staff learning/teaching/training mobility abroad, was launched on 25 March 2021. It is the world’s largest such programme and in the period 1987-2020 about 10m individuals – students, learners, lecturers, teachers and trainers from all sectors – were beneficiaries.

Among its key policy priorities is “to promote equal opportunities and access, inclusion, diversity and fairness across all its actions. Organisations and the participants with fewer opportunities themselves are at the heart of these objectives and with these in mind, the programme puts mechanisms and resources at their disposal.”¹

Erasmus+ Implementation Guidelines (29 April 2021) outline the features of a more inclusive Erasmus+ Programme.

The National Agencies are charged with the task of drawing up “inclusion and diversity plans to best address the needs of participants with fewer opportunities and to support the organisations working with these groups in their national context.”²

In defining the potential barriers that stand in the way of equal access to the Erasmus+ Programme, the 2021 Programme Guide lists the following (not exhaustive):

- Disabilities: physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments
- Health problems
- Barriers linked

- to education and training systems
- Cultural differences
- Social barriers
- Economic barriers
- Barriers linked to discrimination
- Geographical barriers

National Agency – Contribution to Inclusion

The HEA has been the National Agency (NA) for Erasmus from the Programme's inception in 1987. In more recent years, increasing attention has been paid to broadening participation in the programme. The NA has played an active part in policy formation in this area and has been a strong advocate for changes in the programme. The following are some of the areas where the Agency has contributed.

Erasmus+ Disadvantaged Participants Monthly Top-up

In 2014, the NA with the support of the Erasmus+ National Authority (Department of Education and Skills) introduced the Student Inclusion Supplementary Support Initiative (SISSI) an optional top-up available under the programme. Students in receipt of the Higher Education Grant (SUSI) were eligible for an additional €100 per month. In 2015, 210 students (7% of total outbound numbers) received this top-up. In 2020, 663 or 17% of the total outbound numbers received the increased top-up support of €180 per month. The National Agency welcomes the support to be provided in the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-27 where a mandatory top-up of €250 per month is to be provided.

Erasmus Working Group on inclusion of students and staff with disabilities

Gerry O'Sullivan of the NA chaired a Working Group set up under the auspices of the European Commission from 2015-17. This WG developed Recommendations (See below) to support national agencies and higher education institutions in promoting a more equitable participation of students and staff with physical, mental or health-related conditions which prevented them fully participating in the Erasmus+ Programme.

Erasmus+ Support for Students with Disabilities

The National Agency collaborates with the International and Disability Offices of the HEIs in supporting students with disabilities. The NA provides additional financial assistance to about 6-9 students annually who due to their physical, mental or health-related condition require supplementary financial support to cover the extra costs of a learning mobility. This supplementary support has assisted students with Cerebral Palsy, Spinal Cord Injury, Spinal Cord Curvature, Visual Impairment, Mental Illness, Limb Amputation, Chronic Illness, Narcolepsy as well as other conditions. These mobility experiences have a profound

impact on the beneficiaries helping them to grow personally and professionally as well as augmenting their independent living skills.

Irish Universities Association

The Erasmus+ NA at the HEA was a contributor to the Erasmus+ Key Action 3 - Support for Policy Reform Project – “Enhancing Mobility of Access Students in Ireland (EMASI)”, which was led by the Irish Universities Association (IUA).

A key outcome of the project in 2018 was the development of a resource – www.mobilitytoolkit.ie - to assist HEIs who are engaged in widening participation in mobility programmes, especially for students from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds.

Report 2018

EMASI Report Launched – Department Press Release 27 April 2018

DAAD Long-term Transnational Co-operation Activity (LTA)

In 2021, the National Agency was invited to join a long-term Transnational Co-operation Activity by the German National Agency for EU Higher Education Cooperation - DAAD. LTAs are activities where national agencies and others combine their strengths/expertise to improve the quality and impact of the Erasmus+ Programme at a systemic level.

This LTA should be concluded by 2024 so as to feed its results into the mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ Programme. The LTA has set the following goals:

- Strategy Development · Creation of a network · Co-operation with European Commission and stakeholder groups · Mapping and mining of data · Documentation of results (progress, challenges) · Involvement of stakeholder groups.

The following are the target groups:

- NA Inclusion Officer · NA Directors · European Commission · National Authorities · Experts from relevant disciplines for selected topics (thematic, methodological) · Project co-ordinators · Representatives of stakeholder groups · Experts from relevant disciplines.

The TCA has held one meeting so far on 12 March 2021 which was attended by Gerry O’Sullivan and Aileen Marron as well as representatives from the NAs in Germany, France, Greece, Norway, Serbia, Slovakia, Netherlands and Sweden. The next meeting is planned for 18 June 2021.

Promotion

The National Agency works closely with the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) and both organisations have contributed to events organised by the other party.

Erasmus+ 2021-27 and Inclusion

The new programme, which comes into effect from 1 September 2021, includes a range of measures that are specifically targeted at widening participation. The National Agency has been a leader in advocating for many of these changes over a number of years. They include:

- All National Agencies must prepare an inclusion plan.
- HEIs will get (under organisational support) an additional €100 per participant that belongs to a ‘fewer opportunities’ category.
- Students from a ‘fewer opportunities category’ will get a top-up of €250 per month for the mobility period.
- Short-term mobilities combined with a virtual component will be possible ranging from 5 to 30 days for those with fewer opportunities. Top-up support of between

€100 to €150 will apply. Travel support may also be provided.

- Preparatory visits for students/staff/parents for certain students will now be possible. This will be hugely important in addressing the “fear of the unknown” factor, which often discourages students with disabilities from undertaking a study visit or traineeship.

National Access Plan 2022-2026

The National Agency would like to request that the National Access Plan include among its goals the following or similar:

- The National Access Plan shares the objective of the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-27 that the programme should promote the values of inclusion and diversity, tolerance, and democratic participation.
- The National Access Plan and the Erasmus+ National Agency at the Higher Education Authority agree that the provisions of this plan will form the basis for the NA’s Inclusion and Diversity Plan.
- The National Access Plan supports Government and Institutional International Strategies in the area of expanding the internationalisation of the Irish higher education sector.
- The National Access Plan calls on the Access/Disability Units of higher education institutions to jointly work with the international offices to prioritise the selection of student and staff beneficiaries from categories that have fewer opportunities to partake in the Erasmus+ Programme.
- The National Access Plan and the Erasmus+ National Agency at the Higher Education Authority agree that the target groups defined in the Plan will form the basis for measuring progress in this area.
- The National Access Plan and the Erasmus+ National Agency agree that sector targets in this area will be set each year in the NA’s Annual Work Programme which

is submitted to the European Commission following agreement with the Erasmus+ National Authority – the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

- The National Access Plan and the Erasmus+ National Agency agree that the National Agency will retain full responsibility for the implementation of the actions detailed in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide.
- The National Access Plan to recommend that the National Access Office and the Erasmus+ National Agency hold periodic meetings to share information and to address any issues that may arise.