

Tackling social inequalities in Erasmus+ participation

Guðmarsdóttir, Rúna; França, Thais; Jokila, Suvi; Lomer, Sylvie; Netz, Nicolai; Roohi, Sanam; Van Mol, Christof

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European Network on International Student Mobility
Connecting Research and Practice

**Tackling social inequalities in
Erasmus+ participation**
ENIS Policy Brief 01/2023

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1. Snapshot overview

In the period of 2021-2027, the Erasmus+ programme has a budget of €26 billion to support a more inclusive European Education Area, with intra-European student mobility at its core. Considering the increased emphasis on inclusion in Erasmus+, this policy brief aims to explore the profile of Erasmus+ students and the obstacles they face when going abroad. It draws particular attention to students' socio-economic background, gender, and disability status.

Our analysis shows that although steps have been taken towards more inclusion and diversity of Erasmus+ participants, study abroad opportunities are still not equally accessible to all students. Therefore, we formulate five recommendations for higher education institutions, national agencies, and the European Commission with a view of making international student mobility more inclusive.

2. Main Issue to be addressed

In various communications (1, 2, 3), the European Commission has highlighted that opportunities to become internationally mobile should be accessible to all young people, regardless of their socio-demographic characteristics. Against this background, this policy brief aims to provide a succinct overview of key empirical findings on social inequalities in Erasmus+ student mobility. The target group of this brief are policymakers at the European, national, and institutional levels, particularly those who work with Erasmus+ and have an impact on its design and implementation.

3. Key findings

Students' socio-economic status, gender, and disability status are characteristics that may lead to social inequalities in access to the types of international mobility funded through the Erasmus+ programme.

First, research on participation in international student exchanges consistently indicates that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to complete stays abroad compared to students from higher socio-economic backgrounds (4). Studying abroad is generally a costly enterprise and – despite the financial support that is already available – students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to study abroad. In fact, financial barriers are the most frequently mentioned obstacle when it comes to Erasmus+ participation (5).

Erasmus+ requires participants to submit supporting documents before they receive the first payment of their grant, but there are cases in which a delay in providing documents is encountered due to the administrative procedures of institutions involved. Delayed payment of the grants affects students from lower socio-economic backgrounds more than others because they report more problems in covering their expenses through other financial sources (6). As of 2022, institutions are not allowed to postpone the payment for students who receive inclusion support or an increased grant because of fewer mobility opportunities on national level. This can be considered an important step towards reducing financial barriers. The institutions are,



however, still allowed to keep up to 30 percent of the grant amount until the mobility period has ended.

Beyond individual characteristics, other institutional and academic constraints further limit students from lower socio-economic background: These students often tend to be clustered in institutions and fields of study in which study abroad opportunities are low (7).

Second, women tend to be more likely to participate in Erasmus+ than men in many Western countries (8, 9, 10, 11). This gender gap can largely be explained by gender-specific interest profiles that women and men develop throughout their early life courses. These interest profiles result in women choosing fields of study in which studying abroad is particularly common and in a more pronounced desire to get to know other languages and cultures (12).

Third, despite increases in financial support for students with disabilities throughout the past years, the number of Erasmus+ participants from these groups has remained extremely low. According to data from the European Commission, less than 0.15 percent of all Erasmus+ students received grants for costs linked with disabilities in the past programme periods (8, 13). However, the share of students with disabilities in European higher education amounts to 15 percent (5). Moreover, it differs from one participating country to the other how active their institutions are in sending and receiving students with disabilities. Universities located in Spain, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian countries receive students with disabilities to a greater degree than universities in other European countries; universities in Italy, Germany, and Eastern European countries are the main senders (14).

There is also an imbalance in terms of institutional collaborations. More inclusive institutions tend to partner with equally inclusive institutions, restricting inclusiveness to specific institutional circuits (14). While students with disabilities share some of the obstacles that students without disabilities encounter to move abroad (financial support, linguistic barriers, and validation of credits), the lack of clear and sufficient information on the institutional support that is available to them constitutes a significant additional barrier (15).

4. Recommendations

01 | For higher education institutions

Ensure fully transparent selection criteria for applicants to the Erasmus+ programme, as unclear procedures affect students with fewer opportunities more negatively than others.

02 | For the European Commission

Ensure that a full pre-financing payment is compulsory in the case of students with fewer mobility opportunities on national level. The payment should cover 100 percent of the Erasmus+ grant amount.



03 | For higher education institutions

Pay the Erasmus+ grant to students from lower socio-economic backgrounds as early as possible, as they often do not have the money available to bear the initial costs of mobility. It is now stipulated in the student grant agreement that the pre-financing payment needs to be carried out before the mobility period starts. Institutions need to ensure that this principle is complied with.

04 | For national agencies and higher education institutions

Provide information about the benefits of international student mobility to the whole student body – with an enhanced focus on and targeted messages to the groups that are currently less likely to become internationally mobile.

05 | For national agencies and higher education institutions

Provide clear and detailed information to students with disabilities on the Erasmus+ process and the support available to them. This applies not only to financial support, but also to the support mechanisms available to students with disabilities at the host institution. These students may require longer periods for planning a stay abroad, for instance because of people accompanying them during their mobility period.

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6. Authors' information

Rúna Vigdís Guðmarsdóttir

Rannís

Stakeholder Advisor of Working Group 2

runa.gudmarsdottir@rannis.is

Thais França

University Institute of Lisbon

ENIS Grant Awarding Coordinator and Member of Working Group 2

thais.franca@iscte-iul.pt



Suvi Jokila

Turku University
Member of Working Group 2
suvi.jokila@utu.fi

Sylvie Lomer

University of Manchester
Member of Working Group 2
sylvie.lomer@manchester.ac.uk

Nicolai Netz

German Centre for Higher Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW)
ENIS Vice Chair
netz@dzhw.eu

Sanam Roohi

University of Göttingen
Leader of Working Group 2
sanam.roohi@gmail.com

Christof Van Mol

Tilburg University
ENIS Chair
c.vanmol@tilburguniversity.edu

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