



**DIRECTORATE GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES**  
**POLICY DEPARTMENT B: STRUCTURAL AND COHESION POLICIES**

**CULTURE AND EDUCATION**

**IMPROVING THE PARTICIPATION IN THE  
ERASMUS PROGRAMME**

**STUDY**

**Abstract**

This study explores the extent to which European students experience financial and other barriers to participation in the ERASMUS programme. The evidence indicates that the main barriers to participation vary significantly between countries, with the exception of financial issues, which are an important concern for students everywhere. ERASMUS participation is associated with students' socio-economic background, primarily influenced by individual preferences and cost-benefit considerations rather than questions of affordability. Other barriers to ERASMUS participation include problems with study credit recognition, as well as insufficient language skills and existing personal commitments.

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education.

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## **LINGUISTIC VERSIONS**

Original: EN.  
Translation: DE, FR.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Aim of the study

Since its inception in 1987 the EU's ERASMUS programme has enabled over 2.2 million students and 250,000 members of university staff to be mobile within Europe. Currently, over 180,000 students study and work abroad each year through the ERASMUS scheme. While the number of students who participate in the programme has been constantly increasing, the participation rate is still below 4% in most countries. Furthermore, in several countries the growth in participation numbers has stagnated or even declined.

The purpose of this study is to look into financial and other possible barriers that might hinder student participation in ERASMUS and to draw conclusions about ways to improve participation. The following main questions are answered in the study:

- What is the current state of affairs with respect to student mobility and particularly ERASMUS participation in different European countries?
- To what extent do financial barriers restrain students from participating in the ERASMUS programme?
- To what extent is the ERASMUS programme accessible to students from all socio-economic groups?
- What other factors, such as personal motivation, awareness, conditions of the ERASMUS grant, and compatibility between higher education systems, influence ERASMUS participation?
- What financial mechanisms and other initiatives would increase the number of ERASMUS students in the future?

The analysis is based on three sources of information: desk research, a student survey, and case studies. The *desk research* includes a synthesis of information from existing studies and data. We conducted a *survey* among ERASMUS and non-ERASMUS students to inquire about their motivation for and barriers encountered regarding their participation in ERASMUS. The survey was conducted in seven countries that represent the greatest variety in terms of perceived financial barriers (high/low) and the level of ERASMUS participation (high/low). The final sample includes 21,145 responses, from which 8,697 responses come from non-ERASMUS students and 12,448 responses from ERASMUS students. *In-depth case studies* were conducted in four countries: their purpose is to verify the results and to learn about potential good practices.

Many earlier studies have explored the obstacles to ERASMUS participation. This study brings together evidence from other studies and validates their conclusions with a new student survey. Furthermore, most studies on mobility examine the motivational factors and obstacles as perceived by mobile students. It is, however, as interesting to also examine students who have not participated in a mobility programme and to get insights into barriers perceived by these students. The current survey among non-ERASMUS students is therefore an important added value of this study to existing knowledge. Furthermore, the in-depth case studies show interesting national and institutional practices to further strengthen the ERASMUS programme.

## **Key findings about the participation in the programme**

The number of ERASMUS students has continually increased since the end of the 1980s. In the last few years the increase has been particularly steep, even taking into account the increase in the size of the student pool as new member states have joined the EU. The overall proportion of students in the ERASMUS programme varies between 0.1% and 1.5% of all students enrolled, with an exception of Luxemburg where the participation rate exceeds 6%. The participation rate tends to be lower in the new member states, but the growth in enrolment tends to be the fastest in these countries and overall rates are thus equalising. In some older member states, the ERASMUS participation rate has stagnated or even declined.

Students' reasons for participation in the programme are primarily for personal development: for the opportunity to live abroad, meet new people, acquire "soft skills", but also to improve foreign language skills. The expected benefits to the future career rank lower in terms of individual priorities, but remain an important factor for most students.

ERASMUS students tend to come from higher socio-economic groups. Other indicative trends evident are that in most countries relatively more ERASMUS students come from traditional 'academic' universities rather than alternative higher education institutions (HEI), and more from capital regions and other cities. ERASMUS participation rates are the highest among students in the field of economics and social sciences, and lowest in sciences. ERASMUS students are more likely to be younger than average students.

## **Key findings on financial barriers**

Financial constraints are the most important factor that restricts ERASMUS participation. 57% of non-ERASMUS students say that studying abroad is too expensive to consider and 29% of students reject ERASMUS after consideration because the grant provided is insufficient to cover incurred costs.

The extent to which students perceive financial barriers varies significantly across countries. Students in the majority of countries are highly concerned by financial barriers, although in a number of countries, notably Finland and Sweden, concern with financial barriers is relatively lower than for other issues. Nevertheless, in all countries financial constraints rate among the top three of students' concerns with relation to mobility.

Perceived barriers, however, do not seem to lower the national participation rate or to increase the proportion of students from higher-income families among mobile students. It is not only the availability of money that constrains students, but particularly the balance between expected costs and expected benefits: students invest more of their own resources into the ERASMUS experience where they expect direct labour market benefits. It is clear that the value of foreign higher education experience is higher in labour markets where fewer graduates have those experiences. Therefore, as the number of students with experience of studying abroad increases, so the relative labour market advantage of that foreign experience declines. In recent years, the individual financial advantage accrued in the labour market for ERASMUS participation has declined. Consequently, in some countries (notably those with the highest levels of foreign study), ERASMUS is not seen as a rational investment in a future career but rather a luxury best avoided by students with limited resources.

ERASMUS students tend to come from higher socio-economic groups. The tendency is particularly evident in wealthier countries compared to less wealthy countries in Europe. This is likely to reflect country-specific differences in the way that the ERASMUS programme is regarded, depending on its expected economic returns to students in the future, offering either “consumption benefits” or “investment benefits”.

What is therefore the limiting factor in ERASMUS participation by students from lower socio-economic groups is not the availability of direct funding such as access to student loans or family resources. Rather it is their sensitivity towards additional expenditures associated with a period of study abroad.

Related to this, it is not only the gross level of the grant which affects students’ willingness to participate in ERASMUS, but explicitly also the practicalities of being funded for a period of study in an unfamiliar environment, including uncertainty about the costs incurred, the final level of the ERASMUS grant to be paid and uncertainty about the match between the payment schedule and the point at which expenses are incurred.

Other specific findings include:

- The extent to which surveyed students perceive financial barriers varies significantly across countries. In 5 out of 7 countries it is the most important constraint preventing students considering studying abroad; in other 2 countries the problem is in the top 3.
- Although it is difficult to offer a reliable estimate on the number of potential mobile students who do not study abroad because of financial constraints, we estimate this number between 980,000 and 1.5 million students. However, financial constraints are not the only barriers to participation, and even if the financial issues were completely resolved, it is likely that a substantial proportion of these students would not study abroad because of issues related to family and personal relationships.
- Recognition of credits is also an important concern for students in almost all countries. An average of 34% of students identified that fears with credit recognition influenced their decision not to participate in ERASMUS, with the number reaching 60% in some countries. In several countries, this is compounded by the fear that problems with credit recognition will delay graduation and incur additional costs via accumulated student loans, tuition fees, and/or postponed earnings.
- Student financial support systems differ significantly in Europe with respect to the relative proportion of grants, loans and other types of subsidies and the absolute level of support. The evidence seems to suggest that where students have an independent income source (universal grants) they perceive lower financial barriers for ERASMUS participation. There is not a visible relationship between needs-based aid in national systems and the socio-economic distribution of ERASMUS students.
- Funds available for student mobility vary significantly across countries but appear to be positively related to ERASMUS participation. It is not clear whether it is the additional funding that encourages participation or whether that funding signals that internationalisation is an important element of the national agenda for higher education. Where internationalisation is seen as an important part of universities’ activities, students may feel a greater “pressure” to become mobile.

## Key findings on other potential barriers

Financial obstacles are not the only important aspect that affects ERASMUS participation. Four other sets of potential barriers to ERASMUS participation can be identified: the conditions of the ERASMUS programme, the compatibility of higher education systems, a lack of awareness of the programme, and personal factors.

Students appeared to be highly interested in the opportunity to study abroad. Only 24% of non-ERASMUS students reported not being interested in a study abroad programme. At the same time, there were three aspects that concerned students about participation in a study abroad programme, namely recognition issues, foreign language skills, and personal relationships that constrain their wider mobility.

The specific findings concerning these other potential barriers were:

- Other than financial issues, the importance of other potential barriers shows a strong national pattern of variation.
- Students stated that recognition of credits is the most important factor that would motivate them to participate in a study abroad programme (66% agreed with this), whilst 62% suggested a higher level of the ERASMUS grant, and 62% indicated wanting to be able to choose a host university outside the listed institutions.
- 41% of students reported being at least partly discouraged from studying abroad because of limited foreign language skills. The percentage varies between 34% and 62% across countries.
- Among non-ERASMUS students, personal relationships and family reasons that restricted their wider mobility were a (very) important barrier to almost half of the students (46%), varying between 36% and 58% across countries. These factors were most significant for those who had not seriously considered participating in the ERASMUS programme, whilst ERASMUS students and students who had considered participating in ERASMUS reported the barrier as relatively low.
- Relatively few students mentioned high competition for grants as a barrier. At the same time 6% (3%-13% across countries) of students reported that they did not participate in the ERASMUS programme because their grant application had been unsuccessful, indicating clear demand for more grants.
- Information about the programme continues to be a problem for some students. 53% of the respondents indicated that more information would have convinced them to participate. Conversely, of the participating students, only 16% indicated that they encountered problems with the amount of programme information.
- About 35% of ERASMUS students found the administrative burden to be a considerable difficulty, but at the same time only 16% of students saw administrative requirements to be a (very) important reason influencing their non-participation.
- The image of the ERASMUS programme appears to be 'social' rather than 'academic'. While this may attract some particular groups of students, the ERASMUS programme may be less attractive to students interested in a more intense academic experience.
- On average, about one third of students were concerned about the limited choice of host institutions. In some countries, however, the issue was one of the

foremost concerns, with a total of 61% of students agreeing that more host institution choice would motivate them to participate in the programme.

- About one third of ERASMUS students experienced difficulties derived from uncertainty with the education system abroad (34%) and a lack of integration/continuity between study subjects at home and abroad (33%). Concern about the quality of education abroad was somewhat lower (23%).
- Some issues appeared to be relatively unimportant for students: very few students found the study programme either too long (3-11%) or too short (8-26%). Work responsibilities at home were the least important barrier; a lack of study programmes in English abroad and lack of support regarding student services was a minor problem.
- Most of the barriers are higher for Bachelor students than for Master students but their relative importance remains the same.

## Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study makes the following main recommendations.

### A. Recommendations on financial barriers

- The ERASMUS programme is successful and the study found a significant unmet demand. In light of this, there is a serious need for more ERASMUS grants.
- There are important national differences regarding the most important barriers to ERASMUS participation: it is important to target the policy recommendations to country-specific situations and seek country-specific solutions to the domestic problems. As far as our study revealed (particularly the desk research) there are relatively few national-level analyses of ERASMUS participation rates. Such national research would yield important pointers for domestic policy instruments (e.g. national agencies and institutions specifically targeting those groups of students that participate the least).
- One particular problem arising from mechanisms currently in place is that “successful” countries (i.e. countries with high levels of participation) suffer from their success because of fixed ERASMUS budgets. The options for these countries are (a) to disappoint a large group of students; (b) to lower the grant amount per student; or (c) to allocate additional national funding. It is recommended that European-level measures are taken to avoid penalising success. Making more funds available for high-participation countries, or for countries where demand is significantly higher than the grant covers, would help to address this issue. An alternative policy approach would be the creation of an ERASMUS reserve fund, clawing back funding from countries that have underutilised their budget and re-allocating it to countries that had over-recruited.
- Asking greater student contributions is unfeasible. The economic benefits of ERASMUS participation have been declining whilst the individual economic costs of higher education (tuition fees, reliance on student loans) have risen. Given that rewards for studying abroad are falling, and the ERASMUS grant is not linked to the actual expenses incurred in a period of studying abroad, there is a limited willingness of students to invest their own resources in an activity with ill-defined and potentially open-ended costs that does not bring substantial labour market rewards and often recognition problems.

- ERASMUS students have identified a series of long-term benefits derived from their study abroad, including transferable skills, language acquisition and attitudinal development that could alter students' cost-benefit calculus, and in particular, increase willingness to study/work abroad to access these benefits. In promoting ERASMUS, more attention should be paid to these long-term benefits.
- The use of direct private student investments for the ERASMUS programme is not feasible, but contributions by receiving companies and other agencies involved in ERASMUS placements could be further encouraged. There is considerable scope for increasing placements within the framework of ERASMUS, given the clear benefits for students (despite some administrative issues) and participating companies.
- Previous research has highlighted that the socio-economic background is not the most important barrier impacting on participation in ERASMUS, although it does play a role. In considering which policies would be most effective, the needs of students from a disadvantaged background are best dealt with at the national levels (national student aid system), possibly drawing on resources from individual higher education institutions. Many student aid systems already have mechanisms in place for disadvantaged students, and so there must be concerns that ERASMUS-level policy mechanisms would replicate bureaucracy and reduce transparency.
- There are place-specific differences in participation rates; less developed regions and rural areas typically have lower participation rates than metropolitan and capital city regions. This is particularly the case for those less favoured regions which do not have large research universities, but small specialised institutions, colleges and universities of applied science. There is clearly scope to use European structural funds to increase participation in eligible regions. However, the dynamics of the inequality are not fully clear, and therefore more in-depth study of these problems and inequalities is required before decisive policy action.
- The study unearthed some financial/administrative barriers, particularly around payments procedures. There is a strong case for upfront payments given the problems which late payments can cause, and there needs to be greater transparency about the grant levels. Better information should be provided about the relative gross studying costs for a period of study abroad in relation to the available grants.
- One area of particular concern was in providing information with regard to co-funding opportunities within countries and institutions. Students indicated that this information was lacking and/or not sufficiently transparent. The same argument holds for the portability of national/institutional/other grants and loans. This is an important contribution to overcoming the financial constraints for participation in the ERASMUS programme, but not all students seem to be aware of these opportunities.
- Credit recognition and transfer remains a very important issue, and is generally the second most significant barrier after financial problems. The two issues are clearly connected given that a lack of recognition may lead to a longer study period which incurs additional costs. There are concerns that the Bologna process has not yet significantly addressed recognition issues facing both individual students studying abroad and the Examining Authorities tasked with recognising credits earned elsewhere by their own students.

- There is scope for increasing participation through the use of ERASMUS grants in the context of joint and double degree programmes (which addresses the recognition issue directly) involving an obligatory study abroad period. These schemes have the advantage of enhancing teacher mobility, reducing teaching misunderstandings and ignorance, and thereby contributing to improved student mobility.

## **B. Recommendation on other factors**

- The study showed no significant problems with the average time of a study abroad period (6 months) with ERASMUS grants. There is much scope for mobility opportunities of a slightly different nature, particularly for short intensive programmes (1-3 weeks) involving students and teachers from multiple countries and institutions, targeted on those not (yet) sure of the benefits of a longer period.
- There is the opportunity to open up ERASMUS for longer periods abroad. However, financial envelopes mean that there is a cost trade-off, reducing overall participation (involving as fewer students for longer periods).
- The placements programme was perceived as being successful and appears ripe for further promotion amongst students and employers on the ERASMUS programme for placements. This will increase overall participation, notably at universities of applied sciences where placements are often integral to the curriculum.
- The study revealed potential to resolve some mobility problems outside the higher education system. For example it was shown that students exposed to information about opportunities for studying abroad at an earlier stage in their education career were keener to participate in mobility programmes. There is scope to disseminate more information about studying abroad, and its wider benefits including transferable skills and language skills, in the later stages of secondary education.
- ERASMUS is regarded overall as a success, although the level of that success differs between countries and stakeholders. There are two alternatives for improving the image of ERASMUS. One approach would be to ensure that ERASMUS retains a homogeneous identity for all parties concerned, e.g. through a European-wide information portal, containing inclusive information on European, national and institutional levels. This could include creating uniform "ERASMUS introduction" courses for students who go or intend to go on an exchange. A second approach would be to accept the variety of images and make use of the lived experiences of participants and alumni in promoting the programme, emphasising sharing experiences, practical information, "do's and don't's", buddy or mentoring systems, better integrating visiting students, and strengthening and professionalising student bodies such as the ERASMUS Student Network.