Joint Position Paper on Erasmus without Paper

15 December 2021

Introduction

The undersigned European University Alliances have enthusiastically welcomed the European Commission's initiative on **Erasmus Without Paper (EWP)** and wholeheartedly support its objective of implementing digital workflows to alleviate the administrative burden on both students and staff supporting student exchanges. EWP is key for European Universities in our objective of building **interconnected digital campuses,** while reaching new levels of **student and staff mobility** among our partners.

Our partner universities have been working hard on the ground to implement EWP tools and have been actively engaging in webinars and meetings on EWP at both national and European levels, to ensure that they are in close contact with experts across Europe and are working with the latest available information. Notwithstanding these ongoing efforts, our partner universities continue to experience a number of **significant challenges in the implementation and use of EWP.**

In a note on the **timeline of digitalisation of Inter-Institutional Agreements (IIAs)** to Erasmus+ National Agencies in September 2021, the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture states that every new bilateral IIA between institutions in Programme Countries for mobilities starting in the academic year 2022-23 should be signed through EWP. It further clarifies that both IIAs not based on the new template as well as new IIAs in paper version will not be considered valid for mobility flows in 2022-23. A negative evaluation of a Higher Education Institution's efforts to join EWP may even lead to a withdrawal of that institution's Erasmus Charter for Higher Education in 2023. As a result, hard deadlines have been set by National Agencies and individual higher education institutions. This has caused confusion and created the need to adapt quickly and seek temporary solutions that do not always meet the high quality standards we strive for.

Based on our experience, we see it as our responsibility to share the existing challenges with all stakeholders and highlight the **urgent need for strengthening EWP tools along with more flexibility and extension of the current timeline for implementation**.

Issues on the ground

- The **EWP Dashboard** and related tools are not yet fit for purpose:

- o **Inter-Institutional Agreements (IIAs)** - The interinstitutional agreement manager continues to experience technical issues, resulting in universities having to find time- and resource-intensive workarounds to renew these agreements, such as via email confirmations or the bilateral exchange of PDF and/or Excel files.
  - o **Online Learning Agreements (OLAs)** - while it is possible for institutions to receive OLAs for inbound students, a number of our universities continue to experience difficulties in sending OLAs for outbound students. Currently, our staff are turning to alternative solutions to address these issues in close cooperation with their counterparts at other institutions.
  - o The tools need to be made more stable and technologically sound to be used for the substantial number of mobility flows organised by large higher education institutions.
- Higher Education Institutions face many **technical difficulties trying to connect in-house systems to EWP** and receive inadequate support in doing so. There is currently no possibility to connect existing in-house tools of some of our universities to EWP tools in a manner that ensures the secure transfer of data. Those universities will have to purchase commercial platforms, if they are not given more time and support to connect to EWP.
- Under the current circumstances, **home and host university may not share the same tools, which means that separate workflows are required in the short-term**. This is not only leading to a substantial increase in the workload of staff supporting student exchanges, but also directly impacting our students. As a result, students may face an increased amount of administrative procedures, timelines and paperwork.

Recommendations

We are advocating for a prolongation of the transitional period, which is currently applied to the academic year 2021-22, for those Higher Education Institutions that are not yet able to fully implement EWP tools. Many Higher Education Institutions across Europe need increased support along with more time and flexibility to fully implement EWP and join all related tools, in order to avoid that a number of IIAs on student and staff exchange may be forced to cease to exist, leading to a significant decrease of mobility opportunities. This situation would have **wide-reaching impact on our students and staff members,** including the possible cancellation of planned mobility flows in 2022-23, a reduction in the offering for 2023-24 and following academic years as well as a substantial increase in paperwork - both digital and paper-based - for all actors involved in those exchanges that will be able to go ahead.

In line with the ambition of the Erasmus Without Paper Project to strengthen several key EWP services from 2022 onwards, we would furthermore advocate that a **dedicated helpdesk be developed as soon as possible** as a single point of contact for technical questions. This helpdesk would enable more effective communication on the technical/back-end set-up of EWP tools and provide the targeted ad-hoc support that is so urgently needed.

In addition, the following changes to the **EWP platform** will be necessary in order to reflect **true innovative student-centered mobility and educational experiences** of the future:

- **ISCED F codes:** The existing ISCED F codes are currently not flexible enough to allow for the inclusion of interdisciplinary courses and programmes. We would propose that they be more aligned with the innovative academic offer being developed across the European Higher Education Area, including in the pilot phase of the European Universities Initiative.

- **Multilateral agreements**: In the current circumstances, EWP tools do not address multilateral mobility agreements. We see this as an innovative new way of conceiving mobility opportunities in the future, in particular in the framework of European University Alliances, which should be included in such an ambitious initiative.
- **IIAs with partner countries:** In our view, it is important that EWP tools consider exchanges with partner countries. If universities have to manage these IIAs in a completely separate workflow, it will further increase the pressure on staff and may impact the amount of mobility opportunities on offer for students. This is a particular concern for those European Universities that have a partner from outside the European Union.
- **Mobility types:** Currently, EWP tools are focused on physical long-term student mobilities for study, however, in the future they will also have to accommodate short mobilities, virtual and blended mobilities, doctoral mobility, BIPs and traineeships.

Conclusion

Our universities share a joint commitment to offering as many **high-quality mobility experiences** as possible to our students – both within and outside the European Union, while moving towards a fully digital process as central actors in Europe's digital transition.

At the moment, universities across Europe are working at different speeds when it comes to the implementation of EWP, while being confronted with the above-mentioned hard deadlines. This puts universities in different Member States in very challenging situations that, if not addressed, will result in fewer mobility opportunities for our students and staff in the future.

Our universities are ready to work closely together with both the European Commission and respective Erasmus+ National Agencies to address existing issues in relation to EWP to ensure truly outstanding mobility experiences for our students and achieving one of the key objectives of EWP: alleviating the administrative burden on both students and staff supporting student exchanges. To do that, however, Higher Education Institutions need the necessary support, time and flexibility.

The undersigned,
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