



ASSOCIATION
OF COLLEGES

The impact of Erasmus+ in UK FE colleges

An Association of Colleges report

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Introduction

The Association of Colleges (AoC) is a membership organisation representing publicly-funded colleges of further and higher education in England. In September 2019 we conducted a snap survey of college participation in the Erasmus+ Programme ¹.

Erasmus+ is funded by the European Union (EU) and provides education, training, youth and sport opportunities across the continent. The EU has operated exchange and mobility programmes for over 30 years, and the current Erasmus+ programme cycle runs from 2014-2020. Since 2017:

- Over 100 UK colleges have benefited directly from funding
- UK colleges have delivered over 17,000 mobility² placements with funding assigned for over 30,000 placements
- Around €77million in vocational education funding has been awarded to UK colleges³

The UK is currently debating its future relationship with the EU. Whatever the outcome of Brexit, Government will need to decide what educational opportunities it can offer young people beyond 2020. The purpose of this report is to quantify the impact of the current Erasmus+ Programme in UK FE colleges.

Data highlights

The survey analysed the use of Erasmus+ by colleges, the difference the programme makes to the college community and mobility scenarios should the UK exit Erasmus+. Key statistics are:

- Colleges score Erasmus+ 4.71/5 in terms of overall level of benefit
- 100% of students improved their personal confidence following an Erasmus+ placement
- 85% of colleges use Erasmus+ to provide student work placements that they cannot otherwise offer
- 82% of colleges believe Erasmus+ has benefitted their whole organization
- 94% of colleges could not maintain current mobility levels without funding

AoC also makes 5 recommendations to deliver a sustainable future for mobility in UK colleges.

¹ <https://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/about-erasmus>

² Mobility = a period abroad for work or study completed by an Erasmus+ participant

³ Data provided by the UK Erasmus+ national agency

Methodology

AoC prepared a short survey comprising 21 questions, mostly quantitative in nature. We issued the survey to 63 colleges in our membership that we calculated had participated in Erasmus+ vocational and/or HE strands in the current programme cycle. We also asked our sister networks in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to disseminate the survey to their colleges, for which we extend huge thanks. In total, we received 33 survey returns, comprising responses from individual colleges, college groups and college associations:

Q2. College country and main region (if England):	Number of responses
England - Eastern region	0
England - East Midlands	2
England - London	3
England - North East	1
England - North West	4
England - South East	4
England - South West	6
England - West Midlands	4
England - Yorkshire and the Humber	3
Wales	3
Scotland	3
Northern Ireland	0
Total	33

Programme participation

Key Action 1

Survey questions 3-9 covered college participation in Erasmus+ Key Action 1⁴ (KA1) and Key Action 2⁵ (KA2) projects. 77% of colleges (from 31 respondents) were involved in KA1 as both a 'sending' and as a 'receiving' organisation for students; in other words, sending out their students (usually Home students) on placements in addition to hosting students from other Erasmus+ participating countries. 19% operated as a sending organisation only and 3% as a receiving organisation only. The high proportion of colleges involved in reciprocal exchange emphasises the mutuality of Erasmus+.

⁴ Key Action 1 projects provide short to longer-term work placements or study periods in another EU country

⁵ Key Action 2 projects are transnational partnerships, involving a minimum of 3 EU partners. They generally focus on a specific theme or challenge faced by the partnership and share practice to develop potential solutions or share innovation in vocational education and training

Erasmus+ does not solely provide opportunities for student mobility. It also offers staff mobility activity such as work shadowing, a teaching period abroad or other short-term CPD. 85% of colleges (from 26 respondents) acted as a sending and receiving organisation for staff mobility. Staff mobility through Erasmus+ is used by colleges to create important peer teaching and support networks across Europe.

In terms of volume of mobilities, this survey can only provide a snapshot of activity; comprehensive data is held by the Erasmus+ national agencies. However, the survey responses provided useful insight into average mobility levels in colleges:

Q6. Approximately how many mobilities have you had over the last 5 years in:	Total	Number of colleges	Average	Minimum	Maximum
Key Action 1 mobility – students	8,568	32	268	1	1,324
Key Action 1 mobility – staff	1,285	28	46	0	203

Key Action 2

AoC's survey reported that 50% of colleges (from 32 respondents) were KA2 lead partners, and that on average colleges had been involved in 3 transnational KA2 projects in the last 5 years, involving on average 14 staff. Colleges commented that sometimes whole teams were involved in the dissemination of the projects. The maximum number of KA2 projects a respondent had been involved in was 22. The data showed that 28% of colleges were not involved in KA2 and 22% were involved as partners in projects led by EU 27 organisations.

It is difficult to capture accurately the scale of college participation as a partner in KA2 projects because this data is not held by the UK's Erasmus+ national agencies but by the national agencies in the country where the lead partner is based. Furthermore, whilst the UK Government has committed to underwrite current and approved Erasmus+ projects should the UK leave the EU without a deal⁶, its 'guarantee' will only fund the UK institution leading any KA2 project and not its EU 27 partners. The UK Government guarantee is very welcome at a time when the future of Erasmus+ is uncertain, but it poses a problem for bilateral project continuity.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/register-to-claim-erasmus-and-esc-funding-from-the-government-guarantee>

The Erasmus+ effect

The main part of the survey measured the impact of Erasmus+ in colleges. The standout statistic is that colleges give Erasmus+ 4.71 out of 5 in terms of level of benefit. AoC asked colleges to rate the programme's benefit on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the highest; 74% (from 31 respondents) scored it at 5, with only 3% scoring it at 3, and no scores at all at 1 or 2.

To make sense of why college scored Erasmus+ so highly, it is important to understand how and why the programme is used in colleges:

Q10. Do you use Erasmus+ mobility as part of the following? (Please tick all that apply)	Number of responses	Percent responses
Staff development	25	76%
Student recruitment	20	61%
Student retention	16	48%
An assessed part of a course	14	42%
A work placement which is not available locally to the college	28	85%
Other (please specify)	12	36%
None of the above	1	3%
Total	33	

The data shows that not only is Erasmus+ a student recruitment, retention and assessment tool, but also an invaluable source of work placements. 85% of respondents used Erasmus+ to provide work placements that they could not secure locally. In some parts of the UK, college curriculum areas such as childcare, social care and construction struggle to find enough work placements for their students close to college. They partner with institutions through Erasmus+ to offer placements, often in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands. The introduction of T Levels in 2020 with the qualification's mandatory industry placement means that in the future there will be even more demand for UK employers to provide work placements.

College staff are central to supporting the student-focused elements of Erasmus+, but staff are also beneficiaries of the programme. 76% of survey respondents used the programme as a staff development opportunity. Colleges were asked to detail where within the broader college environment Erasmus+ had evidenced benefit:

- 82% stated Erasmus+ had been beneficial to the whole college
- 70% also agreed Erasmus+ was beneficial to specific departments within the college and to the wider community

Erasmus+ should obviously benefit the college directly, but it is telling that it also benefits the wider community. 88% of colleges stated that they engaged with local employers for incoming or outgoing mobilities. Community benefit is partly engagement with employers and other local organisations but also engagement with the families of participating students. For some students, travelling to Europe on an Erasmus+ visit means their first time out of their local area and their first time abroad. Some colleges organise pre-departure events involving the students' families, to ensure that they have information about what will be involved.

The local community also benefits from incoming Erasmus+ students, who stay locally, spend locally and join classes with local students. Within the EU, the UK is the largest receiving country of Erasmus+ students. There are parts of the UK that are very limited in terms of cultural diversity, and Erasmus+ helps local students to meet their peers from other countries and backgrounds.

Skills development

Students

AoC wanted to quantify the difference that participation in Erasmus+ makes to student skills. Survey question 13 listed a series of skills and asked college respondents to tick all the skills that their students had demonstrably improved when they returned from a KA1 mobility experience. 100% (from 32 respondents) agreed that student personal confidence had improved, testament to the life-changing value of Erasmus+. All the other skills also received high scores:

- Improved team-working - 94%
- Improved technical knowledge in the vocational/academic subject - 91%
- Improved problem-solving - 91%
- Improved communication - 91%
- Improved decision-making - 84%

The results show that Erasmus+ helps the enrichment of both student soft skills and technical skills.

AoC wanted to probe further and establish how colleges had observed the improvement in skills that their students demonstrated. Colleges (from 32

respondents) stated that 94% of their students had shown this in their interaction with other students and with staff. 91% of respondents said skills improvement was manifested in student employment prospects. If students develop their soft skills and technical knowledge during an Erasmus+ placement, it stands to reason that they will be better placed to secure a job or to secure a better job afterwards. They will have more experience of the world of work, of interacting with others and of learning to get themselves to work, on time. One college commented that Erasmus+ had helped students with the ability to live independently.

78% of college respondents said students had demonstrated improvement in their assessment/assignment results and in their further/higher education prospects. This is an important outcome that links back to the use of Erasmus+ by colleges as a recruitment, retention and assessment tool. Colleges commented that Erasmus+ had helped to fill skills gaps identified by their local enterprise partnership and to broaden the student experience in vocational curriculum areas.

Staff

AoC wanted to measure the professional development benefits for college staff who took part in KA1 or KA2 activities. 97% of colleges (from 29 responses) said Erasmus+ gave their staff the opportunity for professional reflection. It had also provided:

- New teaching/assessment methodologies - 83%
- Best practice and ideas from other practitioners - 90%
- A new support network with other practitioners - 93%

No respondents thought that Erasmus+ had not brought benefits to staff. In recent years the college sector has not seen the level of Government investment that it needs, resulting in a strain on staff development and training budgets. Erasmus+ provides an opportunity for staff in both teaching and support roles to gain some much-needed CPD.

A future for Erasmus+?

Whether the UK remains in Erasmus+ for the 2021-2027 programme cycle depends on the outcome of Brexit and negotiations with the EU. AoC wanted to gauge college views on the future of student and staff mobility programmes if they operated outside of Erasmus+.

AoC's survey asked if colleges could self-fund an Erasmus+ equivalent programme on the same scale as current Erasmus+ funding. Only 3% said yes, and a further 3% said they could part-fund on a reduced scale; 94% said they would not be able to fund the same level of activity.

If the UK no longer participates in Erasmus+, 76% of respondents said they would lose the connections with their European partners and 73% said that they would have to stop mobility altogether. These are alarming statistics, especially as 45% of colleges thought that their students and staff would have no opportunities at all to go abroad as a result. Erasmus+ is and always has been the single biggest source of mobility and exchange funding in colleges.

Only 33% of colleges thought that they would try to ask their students to self-fund mobility if the UK was no longer part of Erasmus+. AoC asked colleges what the impact would be on college staff, students and finance if the UK no longer participated in Erasmus+. 88% said there would be significant impact and 12% calculated some impact. Through years of participation in Erasmus+, colleges have incorporated mobility opportunities into elements of the curriculum and the student experience. Without the prospect of continued participation in Erasmus+ or a replacement programme, college students will miss out as mobility opportunities will not otherwise be available.

The UK Government has been considering a range of options for student mobility post-Brexit. These choices include becoming a programme or partner country in Erasmus+ (subject to meeting the criteria), or the UK developing its own replacement mobility programme. AoC asked colleges whether a replacement programme, for example one that operated outside of the EU in countries such as India, the USA, Australia and China would provide a suitable substitute to Erasmus+. The response was mixed:

- Perhaps – 48%
- No – 24%
- Yes – 18%
- Cannot say – 9%

The survey shows that an Erasmus+ replacement programme is an option that merits definite consideration. Colleges did not rule it out but need to see the detail. However, some comments received with our survey clearly position Europe as the most logical, practical and accessible location for FE exchange with the UK.

Conclusion & recommendations

The Erasmus+ Programme works in colleges because it offers funded and flexible mobility opportunities that fit with the curriculum and the personal responsibilities of UK FE students. AoC's Erasmus+ survey evidences the positive impact of the programme on students, staff and the broader college community.

AoC received a range of comments from colleges with their survey responses. The message was consistent: that Erasmus+ broadens the student experience and provides life-changing opportunities in deprived communities. It cannot be summed up in a simple statistic how much of a difference Erasmus+ makes to the student who has had few positive opportunities in their life. Participant testimonials are fundamental to any holistic evaluation of the merits of Erasmus+.

In March 2019 the Government launched its new international education strategy⁷, which stated that mobility and exchange must be a part of any broader internationalisation agenda. If the Government is serious about helping the UK education sector to punch above its weight internationally, and serious about providing parity of opportunity to 'the forgotten 50%' in society who do not go to university, it should continue to invest in mobility at colleges.

AoC makes 5 recommendations based on our survey findings:

1. First and foremost, Government should pursue every avenue to stay in the Erasmus+ Programme, regardless of the outcome of Brexit.
2. If staying in Erasmus+ is not possible, the Government should launch a replacement programme that guarantees the same level of access and opportunity to colleges as Erasmus+ does now.
3. Government should involve AoC and the broader college sector in the design of any replacement programme.
4. A replacement programme should include mobility opportunities within the EU. It should not be restricted to the Commonwealth, English-speaking countries or to an intra-UK scheme.
5. Government should urgently convene vocational, higher education, youth and sport organisations across the education sector to discuss the future of Erasmus+ in the UK.

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⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/international-education-strategy-global-potential-global-growth>

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