

Erasmus GAP - Recommendations to address the mobility gaps in Europe

Introduction to the GAP – where do we stand?

Inclusion is defined as one of the horizontal priorities of the current Erasmus+ programme period, making it a vital goal to ensure equal opportunities to groups that are less represented in Erasmus+ by the end of 2027. When the Erasmus GAP project was proposed, the Erasmus+ **2021 Annual Report had just shown that 8% of Higher Education learners who had a mobility experience were considered as having fewer opportunities.**

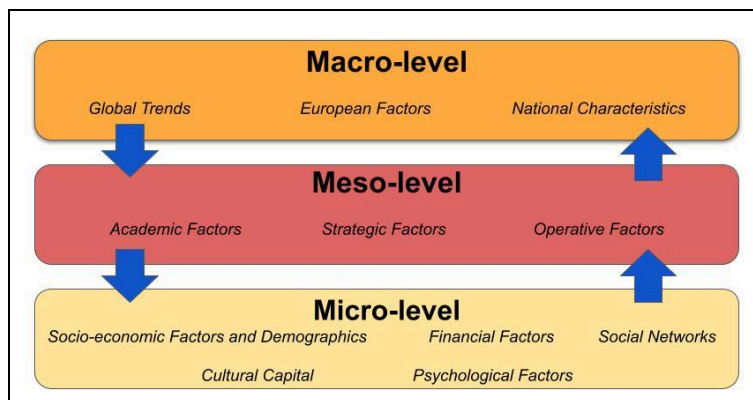
While this information is important to identify the mobility outreach, it still does not allow a full understanding of whether students from all backgrounds in higher education are represented in the mobile student population. This data is essential to grasp how effective the inclusion and diversity measures are in fostering the participation in mobility of students from diverse backgrounds. Institutions, therefore, depend on high-quality data to adapt and create optimal outreach strategies and to understand how mobility rates can be increased. Understanding and addressing these needs is essential to meet the ambitious mobility targets set by the European Commission¹ and to enable all students an invaluable personal and academic experience.

The Erasmus GAP project is compiling extensive datasets from across Europe to highlight disparities between students who have realistic access to mobility opportunities and those who do not. Through data visualisation and targeted training, higher education institutions will be equipped with tools to identify these gaps and design effective strategies to address them. Drawing on strong empirical evidence, the project has produced policy recommendations intended to support decision-makers in creating more inclusive mobility programmes. The findings below are based on an extensive literature review conducted throughout the project and are intended to inform about current structural barriers on the institutional and individual level.

¹ Council Recommendation of May 13, 2024, “Europe on the Move - learning mobility opportunities for everyone” foresees to reach the share of graduates with a learning mobility experience abroad of at least 23 % by 2030, while also aspiring to have at least 20 % of people with fewer opportunities among all learners benefiting from learning mobility abroad by 2027. Retrieved at - https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C_202403364

Insights from the Erasmus GAP Desk Research Report²

The report highlights multiple factors influencing student participation in learning mobility across macro-, meso- and micro-levels. Macro-level factors include global trends like globalisation and internationalisation of higher education, while crises like the



pandemic have spurred alternatives such as virtual exchanges. At the institutional - meso - level, factors such as resources, international partnerships, and strategic internationalisation efforts significantly influence mobility opportunities. At the individual level, socio-economic background, cultural or mobility capital, psychological traits, and financial barriers significantly impact student participation.

Understanding the gap between mobile and non-mobile students is a highly complex issue that extends beyond individual-level factors. While these factors are important, institutional-level dynamics as well as global, regional and national trends are equally crucial in shaping students' participation in international mobility.

Institutional-level factors as barriers and drivers for learning mobility

Studies have already shown that there is a significant lack of knowledge on the institutional dimension of barriers in international student mobility, because the focus on individual factors hindering students from participating has often been emphasised more strongly.

When it comes to the role of institutions, it starts with Europe's institutional networks. They are the crucial base layer on which international collaboration and mobility programmes expand. The limits of institutional opportunities are often also the student's limits. The academic culture itself plays an important role here, too. The effect of a mobility-oriented academic environment has been shown to be very strong, especially when paired with support systems that facilitate

² Understanding and Addressing the Mobility Gap in Higher Education - Desk Research Report, retrieved at - <https://zenodo.org/records/14827470>

student engagement in these opportunities. The selection of students purely based on their academic merits, however, often works against these endeavours and reinforces inequalities.

Teaching and grading aspects have retained a more ambiguous role. While some studies highlight primarily the challenges of being confronted with different teaching and evaluation methods abroad, others show that, in certain cases, students try to take advantage of what they believe results in a more advantageous grading than at their home university. More transparency would be needed to better understand how to facilitate a more seamless transition for mobile students. Issues also remain on the integration of mobility into higher education curricula, and it has been proven that early exposure to an international academic environment increases the likelihood of participating in a study abroad programme later again.

Mobility windows implemented in the curricula are key to paving the way for students to consider and finally conduct mobility without disrupting the overall academic progress. Mandatory mobility phases could promote international engagement by default; however, the implementation needs careful consideration to not create unnecessary barriers for students that would prevent them from choosing certain fields. A greater variation regarding length and location could also present a low-threshold offering for students who perceive semester-long mobility as too overwhelming or “risky”.

Individual-level factors as barriers and drivers for learning mobility

To understand the different nature of potential obstacles, it is important to differentiate between objectively and subjectively perceived barriers. In the Desk Research Report, they were further classified into five categories of individual-level factors that will be explained below: **demographic and socio-economic factors** (1); **cost-related factors, financial barriers** (2); **social networks** (e.g. family, friendship and other communities) and **cultural and mobility capital** (e.g. language skills, previous mobility experiences) (3-4). **Psychological factors** that influence students’ planning were less categorised as an obstacle, but still need to be taken into account for understanding (5).

From Barriers to Solutions – Recommendations to close the mobility gap³

Introduce systematic data collection and monitoring on student characteristics, such as socio-economic backgrounds, and their participation in mobility, to track discrepancies between mobile and overall student populations. This way, real-time monitoring of mobility flows and inequalities can be enabled, and evidence-based policies on European, national and institutional levels can be developed, addressing the existing mobility gaps and tailoring the necessary support to ensure wider student participation in mobility.

On a European level, the findings from the data collection can be integrated into Erasmus+ interim and future programme designs, as well as support defining (inclusive) mobility targets and focal areas. Further commitments for inclusive mobility can be integrated in the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education⁴, and strengthened with measures included in the ECHE monitoring, carried out by the National Agencies. As barriers and trends can vary across the countries, context-specific support measures need to be adapted on a national level.

At an institutional level, the availability of granular data showing differences between mobile and overall student populations can support the introduction of targeted support for students and the adjustment of institutional strategies for internationalisation. Furthermore, institutions are encouraged to assess the effectiveness of existing inclusion strategies through the Erasmus GAP Inclusivity Toolkit⁵.

Develop targeted outreach and support strategies for student groups underrepresented in the mobile student cohort based on the data collected about the discrepancies between mobile and overall student population. Such strategies can address specific student groups based on their characteristics, such as students with disabilities, first generation students, mature learners, working students, etc., as well as study field-specific barriers, such as students in regulated professions, e.g. medicine or teacher training. When institutional data supports the conclusions of intersection between students' individual and institutional hindering factors, measures need to be put in place to limit the structural constraints.

³ Mobility gap - refers to the disparity between students who have realistic opportunities to participate in student mobility and those who face significant barriers preventing the first-generation student access

⁴ Erasmus Charter for Higher Education, retrieved at https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/Erasmus-ECHE-certificat_vert-EN.pdf

⁵ Erasmus GAP Inclusivity Toolkit, retrieved at <https://www.erasmusgap.uvsq.fr/inclusivity-toolkit>

Support capacity building for higher education institutions, and support the development of institutional strategies that enable inclusive practices for internationalisation. By implementing the Erasmus GAP training module⁶, higher education institutions can equip their staff members working with mobile and potentially mobile students with the competencies needed to support inclusive mobility. It offers a competence framework for training, thereby creating a common base for staff and potentially students to take on the horizontal priorities in the Erasmus+ programme.

Peer-to-peer learning can also be used as a valuable tool for staff members to exchange best practices. Higher education institutions are encouraged to offer international opportunities to their staff members as a way to develop new competencies. Such opportunities can also strengthen their understanding of the values of learning mobility and differences in academic cultures across Europe and beyond.

Strengthen early awareness of international opportunities to increase participation in mobility at later stages of higher education. A cross-sectoral approach can be beneficial, introducing international opportunities already prior to higher education, e.g. during secondary education with information provisions or engagement in mobility. Similarly, offering international opportunities in the early stages of higher education can lead to increased interest and participation in semester-long mobility. This can be achieved through short mobilities, such as summer schools and blended mobility programmes, or targeted outreach early on, changing student perception about the values and opportunities available.

⁶ Erasmus GAP Staff Training Guidelines, retrieved at <https://www.erasmusgap.uvsq.fr/staff-training-guidelines>