

Enhancing  
mobility of

# Access Students Ireland



**Report Summary**

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## Introduction and Context

Ireland supports the goals of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to strengthen the higher education systems of member states through the Bologna process, and to promote student mobility throughout the region. Student mobility helps to achieve the objectives of the EHEA by developing linguistic skills, cultivating intercultural sensitivities and fostering professional competencies<sup>1</sup>. The EHEA has set the target for graduates of member states to have experienced a period studying abroad by 2020, to 20%.

Ireland's national strategy on International Education (2016-2020)<sup>2</sup> aspires to increase student mobility to above European average by 2020 – a challenging goal, as less than one in five higher education students in Ireland currently study abroad. In tandem, Ireland has set ambitious targets to increase the participation of 'non-traditional' students in higher education.

This report seeks to inform public policy in Ireland around outward mobility and address European higher education modernisation challenges associated with social inclusion, employability, skills and internationalisation.

The report identifies both the benefits of and barriers to participation in study or placement abroad and presents a series of recommendations to widen participation at the national and institutional levels. The findings will be utilised to create easily accessed toolkits for Higher

Education Institutions (HEIs) to assist in widening participation in mobility programmes.

The study employed a number of research methodologies including detailed data analysis, desk research, literature reviews, a survey of two HEIs, student focus group sessions and stakeholder interviews.

Some issues emerged over the course of the research – particularly in relation to data availability – which have imposed limitations upon this study. Of greatest significance was the unavailability of comprehensive data on outward mobility in Ireland. Only information on Irish domiciled undergraduate students who participated in Erasmus+ programmes was accessible, as Irish HEIs are not required to report outward mobility data (beyond Erasmus) to the Higher Education Authority or any other body.

## The benefits and barriers to international student mobility

International research has conclusively demonstrated the benefits associated with studying or placement abroad. Studies in the U.S. further suggest that this impact is magnified for under-represented groups.

Benefits include:

1. **Improved career and employment opportunities:** several recent studies have highlighted how the skills developed while studying abroad are transferrable to the workplace – such as confidence, communication skills and cultural awareness – giving graduates a competitive advantage when seeking employment. Research conducted by the European Commission (EC)<sup>3</sup> for example found that former Erasmus+ students were less than half as likely to be unemployed than non-mobile students and that mobile students experience significant progression within their careers. In Ireland 82% of students who participated in Erasmus+ equate their experience with the development of labour market skills.
2. **Higher education performance:** mobile students are more likely to attain enhanced academic results and improved academic performance<sup>4</sup>.
3. **Personal development:** students rate study abroad and work placement as having a significant impact on their personal development<sup>1</sup>.
4. **The development of language skills:** research from the Eurydice Network<sup>1</sup> indicates that the development of language skills has significant implications for the future employment of students. Teichler et al report that “former Erasmus students felt 3 times as strong in foreign language proficiency as did formerly non-mobile students”<sup>5</sup>.

## Barriers to outward mobility

Enrolment in mobility programmes has been described as “socially selective”<sup>1</sup> with students from low socio-economic backgrounds less likely to participate or plan to participate in these programmes. Financial barriers are often cited as the most significant obstacle to studying abroad. Other barriers to mobility include separation concerns, personal background, age, concerns around academic issues and credit transfer, poor language skills, compatibility, motivation and lack of awareness of the availability of programmes.

Specifically, in relation to Ireland, the mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme highlights that “there are aspects of the application processes underpinning the Erasmus+ programme which are creating intrinsic barriers to participation”<sup>6</sup>.

## Higher Education Mobility Trends

The research indicates that Ireland’s Erasmus+ participation is increasing, but stands just slightly above the EU average at approximately 5%. For students from a disadvantaged background or minority group this reduces to well below 1%<sup>7</sup>. In an analysis of the Eurydice Mobility Scoreboard Ireland was found to have a weak performance against almost all criteria, and it was noted that Ireland is not currently conducting any monitoring of participation of target groups in mobility programmes.

Ireland’s higher education grants are portable, and a further ‘disability grant’ is available for mobility (not for work placement). In 2014 the HEA introduced an additional monthly fund of €120 for students from disadvantaged backgrounds participating in outward Erasmus+ programmes. Although the fund is relatively new, 8% (253 students) of participants availed of it for the 2015-2016 academic year.

## Results and recommendations from the survey and focus groups

As part of this study, research around mobility was undertaken in two Irish HEIs: The University of Limerick and Limerick Institute of Technology. This involved a survey of the HEIs (exploring the operational aspects of mobility programmes) and focus groups/interviews with previously mobile students (exploring their experiences with mobility).

In consideration of the findings at **institutional level**, this report offers a series of recommendations around promoting participation and ensuring a positive and beneficial experience for students. Crucially, widening participation in mobility programmes is dependent on leadership support and empowering mobility champions within the institution. Empowering these champions requires funding, academic buy in, agility in programme development and effective planning and review of mobility programmes. The close collaboration of relevant departments to ensure a positive mobility experience for students is vital. The study finds that the international office serves as a driving force and anchor for this collaboration and should be resourced adequately to support this role.

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<sup>3</sup>The Eurydice network supports and facilitates European cooperation in the field of lifelong learning by providing information on education systems and policies in 38 countries and by producing studies on issues common to European education systems. [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/index\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/index_en.php)

Widening participation measures require clear information and effective promotion to be provided to students, and best practice guides from other European projects and HEI's can serve as a useful reference point when creating information and engagement strategies. Institutions can also drive mobility across all student demographics by linking successfully to other mobility programmes such as the European Voluntary Service (EVS) scheme where shorter mobility periods and financial assistance is available to students from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds. Students are also encouraged to take ownership of and responsibility for their mobility. Therefore, student involvement in the planning phase of mobility is crucial to effectively assess the student needs.

The focus groups and interviews allowed the **student voice** to emerge and resulted in a number of recommendations to overcome barriers to mobility and improve the student experience. The barriers experienced by all students who wish to participate in a mobility programme are significantly amplified for students from disadvantaged backgrounds or minority groups.

The students who overcame these barriers explain that a "*nothing ventured nothing gained*" perspective is necessary. Students with disabilities in particular accept there is a certain level of risk, but planning effectively with the home institution helps mitigate these risks. Students recommend that significant improvements are needed on the information provided across many aspects of mobility. These include timely and accurate information, addressing health, accommodation, and personal concerns, finance and funding, application processes, encouraging language exchange and learning and the timing of alumni information sessions. The focus groups identified **shorter mobility programmes** as a good alternative for students with family commitments and financial concerns. All students recommend that a support network is vital before during and after a mobility programme to deal with loneliness, isolation and anxiety issues.

Overall students from disadvantaged backgrounds or minority groups who participated in outward mobility programmes display enormous enthusiasm and positivity towards the experience, stating significant benefits both personally and professionally

**Encouragement** from family, friends and institutional staff was identified by students as a key driver of mobility.

The national picture on study or placement abroad of students from disadvantaged backgrounds or minority

groups is generally unclear and this report makes a number of recommendations for improvements.

If Ireland is to achieve its own goals and those set out in the Yerevan Communiqué 2015<sup>8</sup>, policies and practices need to be informed by reliable data. Recommendations include improved data collection for all levels of higher education mobility, increased funding, tracking around participation and employment post-mobility as well as monitoring and awareness campaigns. In addition, it is recommended to include **specific targets** to widen participation at a national level and link mobility to the national access plan.

Within the context of the reforms suggested here, consideration must also be given to resourcing a national organisation to deal with the increased demand and to assist with streamlining processes. This will place Ireland in line with other EHEA member states.

Finally, in the evolving context of Brexit particular attention must be paid to the potential reality of the UK – the top choice for work placements for Irish students – no longer being part of the programme.

These improvements, particularly around data and information will lead to informed policy and implementation measures to widen participation in outward mobility across all student demographics.



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# Erasmus + Outward Mobility Findings 2012-2016

## Participation in outward mobility programmes

In Ireland, there is no single data repository where the outward mobility of higher education students is recorded, therefore beyond the Erasmus+ programme, mobility is not captured nationally. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students at higher education institutions in Ireland are actively mobile, attending programmes in many countries including China, Japan, South Korea, the USA and Canada, but there is no statistical evidence other than the national data of receiving countries. This highlights significant gaps in data and information in this area for Ireland. Recent proposals by the Irish Research Council seek to address this through the funding of a comprehensive internationalisation project at University College Dublin for the period 2015-2017 (Courtois, 2017).

The provision of consistent and reliable data is also recognised as a priority by Ireland's High Level Expert Group on international education. The availability of such data will enable government and institutions to set realistic goals, monitor progress towards these goals and benchmark the achievement of these goals institutionally and internationally. In the absence of comprehensive data at this juncture, the national picture for this report is presented solely using Erasmus+ data from the HEA.

## Erasmus+

In 1987, Ireland despatched 112 higher education students on its first Erasmus+ programme. Since that time the Erasmus+ programme has expanded to include student traineeships or placements, staff visits, joint projects and capacity building projects. Ireland's outgoing numbers have increased steadily with a significant increase in internships and new destinations in Northern and Eastern Europe. To date over 60,000 students and staff from Ireland have participated in Erasmus+ mobility, while over 100,000 learners have come to study at Irish higher education institutions.

All Irish HEIs are involved in Erasmus+ programmes, but as can be seen from Table 1, for several years the University of Limerick and University College Dublin have been the leading sending institutions. The Dublin Institute of Technology has also featured strongly, but has lost its 'top 3' designation over the last two years to Trinity College Dublin and to NUI Galway.

Table 1 | **Top Five Sending Institutions in Ireland (2012/2013 – 2015/2016).**

Top	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016
1	University of Limerick	University of Limerick	University of Limerick	University of Limerick
2	University College Dublin	University College Dublin	University College Dublin	University College Dublin
3	Dublin Inst. Technology	Dublin Inst. Technology	Trinity College Dublin	Trinity College Dublin
4	Trinity College Dublin	NUI Galway	University College Cork	NUI Galway
5	University College Cork	Trinity College Dublin	Dublin Inst. Technology	Dublin Inst. Technology

Source: HEA, 2017

During the period 2012-2016 a total of 12,007 Irish students went on placement or study through the Erasmus+ programme. Student mobility for studies increased by 9.8% and student mobility for placement increased by 14.9%. The growth of student mobility for placement is indicative of its growing popularity across member states as a mobility option, particularly for students who are looking to add work experience to their résumés prior to graduating. Work placements were introduced into the Erasmus+ programme in 2007 and since then have grown rapidly: in 2016, the annual number of placements was more than three times higher than the number of placements in 2007-08.

In 2015 the Erasmus+ programme further expanded its borders outside the EU for student and staff mobility all over the world.



## Student on Study – SMS

Table 2 shows the growing importance of business and administration subjects over the last two/three years which have overtaken foreign languages as the most important fields of study for Irish mobile students. It is interesting to note that arts and humanities subjects have become more popular in the same period, with social and behavioural sciences dropping from third to fourth place. Figures on mobility from the U.S. show a similar preference for business and related subjects, but a decline in arts and humanities studies. STEM subjects are becoming increasingly important to U.S. students<sup>9</sup>, but do not feature in the top five choices for Irish students, possibly because of perceived language difficulties within these areas.

Table 2 | **Subject Choices for ‘Students on Study’ (SMS).**

Top	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016
1	Foreign Languages	Foreign Languages	Business & Administration	Business & Administration
2	Business & Administration	Business & Administration	Foreign Languages	Foreign Languages
3	Social & Behavioural science	Social & Behavioural science	Arts	Humanities
4	Law	Arts	Social & Behavioural Science	Social & Behavioural Science
5	Arts	Law	Humanities	Law

Source: HEA, 2017

Students on placement (SMP) as Table 3 shows, chose very differently and focus primarily on practical and service-related subjects, with business and foreign languages a lower priority than for SMS. It is interesting to note the subject-choice shift from 2012/13. At that time engineering and biology/biochemistry featured quite strongly, however from 2013/14 these fields have not featured at all, the reasons behind these shifts are not clear.

Table 3 | **Subject Choices for ‘Students on Placement’ (SMP).**

Top	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016
1	Business and Administration	Travel, Tourism, Sports	Services	Services
2	Engineering & Engineering trades	Arts	Arts	Business & Administration
3	Biology & Biochemistry	Business & Administration	Business & Administration	Arts
4	Arts	Health	Health	Health
5	Social & Behavioural science	Humanities	Foreign Languages	Foreign Languages

Source: HEA, 2017

Tables 4 and 5 show the top destinations for Irish students on Erasmus+ programmes. For SMS, the preferences have not changed within the period under review, with France, Spain and Germany the most popular destinations (in that order), reflecting the main language choices available at second level in Ireland. The Netherlands offers many programmes through English and consistently features as the fourth choice for Irish students.

While the UK is the fifth destination choice for SMS, it is the first destination choice for SMP. Given the practical nature of this offering, the UK is the logical destination for most students. However, there are implications here in the context of Brexit, with uncertainty around how long these UK-based programmes will be on offer to other EU member states. This could have serious implications for Irish student participation in placement programmes, in particular for students from under-represented groups and minority groups who may not have strong or confident language skills.

Table 4 | **Student on Study, Destination – SMS.**

Top	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016
1	France	France	France	France
2	Spain	Spain	Spain	Spain
3	Germany	Germany	Germany	Germany
4	Netherlands	Netherlands	Netherlands	Netherlands
5	Sweden/UK	UK	UK	UK

Source: HEA, 2017

Table 5 | **Student on Placement, Destination – SMP**

Top	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016
1	UK	UK	UK	UK
2	Spain	Spain	Spain	Spain
3	France	France	France	France
4	Germany	Germany	Germany	Germany
5	Netherlands	Luxembourg	Netherlands	Luxembourg

Source: HEA, 2017



Figures 1 and 2 illustrate that Ireland conforms to European and international norms, in that females are more mobile than their male counterparts. This is particularly striking with respect to SMS where male participation is declining (from 39% in 2013/14 to 35% on 2015/16). Figure 2 shows a greater balance between males and females on SMP, however male participation has dropped from 46% in 2013/14 to 43% in 2015/16.

Figure 1 | **SMS by gender 2012-2016**

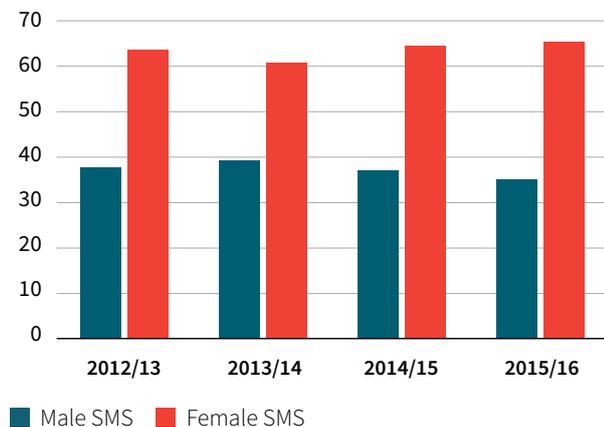
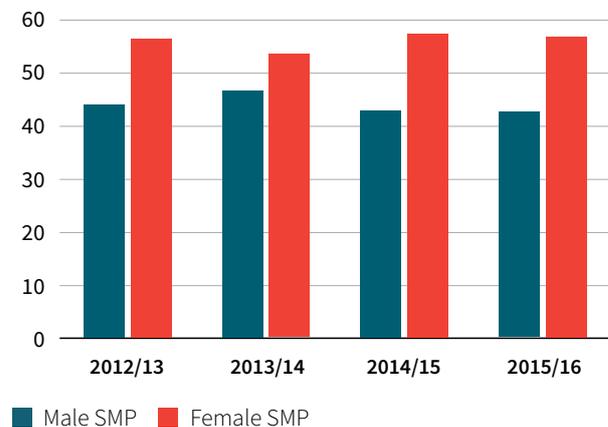


Figure 2 | **SMP by gender 2012-2016**



In line with higher education mobility trends across the globe, Irish Students are increasingly opting for shorter Erasmus periods. As illustrated by Tables 6 and 7, in 2012/13, 53% of SMS studied abroad for 9-12 months, by 2015/16 this had reduced to 39%. SMP percentages are stable for programmes between 6-12 months, but there is a very strong increase in the numbers on programmes of 0-2 months (growing from 1 to 100 over the period under review).

Table 6 | **Students on Study (SMS) by Duration**

Top	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016
0-2 months	7	5	96	4
3-5 months	842	739	891	984
6-8 months	71	253	334	308
9-12 months	1,056	1,032	868	839

Source: HEA, 2017

Table 7 | **Students on Placement (SMP) by Duration SMP**

Top	2012/2013	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016
0-2 months	1	6	202	100
3-5 months	422	460	398	438
6-8 months	284	305	232	355
9-12 months	79	80	24	99

Source: HEA, 2017

# Report conclusions and recommendations

**This report sought to inform public policy in Ireland around outward mobility and address higher education challenges associated with social inclusion, employability, skills and internationalisation. The study has arisen in the context of current higher education policy discussions at both national and European levels. It specifically responds to the Yerevan priorities (2015<sup>10</sup>) that call for widening participation in outward mobility through more inclusive systems to ensure that employability benefits impact upon the working lives of all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds or minority groups.**

Ireland has set ambitious targets to increase the numbers of disadvantaged or minority students accessing higher education, and there is evidence to suggest that progress is being made here. Through Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) schemes the number of disabled students participating in HE has increased by an impressive 450% over the last decade. There has been less success however in attracting HE participation of students from lower socio-economic groups (26% compared to average participation of 52%, and 99% within the highest socio-economic groups).

In striving for equity in international access as well as national access, Ireland has also committed to working towards the achievement of the EHEA targets for graduates of member states to have experienced a period studying or working abroad by 2020, to 20%. However specific targets have not been set.

This report was unable to comment on the broad profile of higher education mobility in Ireland due to significant gaps in the data at the national level. Available data on Erasmus+ mobility for Irish undergraduates shows that Ireland hovers just slightly above the EU average at 5%, with participation of disadvantaged and minority groups less than 1%. Overall, Ireland's performance in streamlining, managing and monitoring Erasmus+

participation generates a weak Eurydice International Mobility Ranking score under all criteria, except for the portability of national grants.

International research has conclusively demonstrated the benefits associated with studying or placement abroad. Studies in the U.S. further suggest that this impact is magnified for under-represented groups. This report has detailed the benefits which include:

- Improved career and employment opportunities
- Higher education performance
- Personal development
- The development of language skills

Students face a number of significant obstacles to mobility, most particularly, as this report describes, socio-economic background, parental education levels and financial concerns. Additional barriers to mobility include separation concerns, personality, age, concerns around academic issues and credit transfer, poor language skills, compatibility, motivation and lack of awareness of the availability of programmes. Specifically, in relation to Ireland, the mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme highlights that the application process itself acts as a barrier.

Based on the international and national research described above, and on the findings from the HEI's and student interactions, the following recommendations are suggested to support the development of student mobility in Ireland, particularly in relation to the participation of disadvantaged and minority groups. The section proposes recommendations at both the national and the HEI level, although there is necessarily significant overlap between the two.

## A. At the national level:

- 1. Given the importance placed upon equality in higher education by the Irish government, it is necessary to generate targets for the mobility of non-traditional students.**

It is important to ensure equality of access to international mobility opportunities for all students and



in particular, create pathways for students from lower socio-economic groups and minority backgrounds to engage such offerings. To address this and ensure equitable access to mobility, Ireland and its higher education institutions need to explore obstacles to mobility within national study frameworks and support systems.

Ireland's internationalisation strategy references increasing mobility for students from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds but no national outward mobility targets are in place for these students. The 2016 Strategy states that "*a review of the number of grant holders as a proportion of Erasmus+ students will be undertaken to see if disadvantaged students are adequately represented*" (2, p43), but this study has not taken place. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 does not make any reference to widening participation in outward mobility programmes for these groups.

Equality of access and widening participation in mobility targets should be included in the strategic dialogue process between HEIs and the HEA to track the progress of widening participation initiatives. A national target should be set and aligned with participation targets in the national access plan. Achievement of these targets should be reflected in Ireland's Internationalisation strategy and its associated working groups.

Within the context of the reforms suggested here, consideration must also be given to resourcing a national organisation to deal with the increased demand and to assist with streamlining processes. This will place Ireland in line with other EHEA member states.

## **2. It is imperative that comprehensive data is available on outbound mobility of Irish students in higher education (including and beyond Erasmus+).**

A key gap observed throughout this research was the dearth of adequate data at the national level. At present, there are no national reporting requirements for HEIs around outward mobility and no agreed definitions exist. Data on student mobility flows is limited and conflicting data is presented from the two main sources of statistical information currently available.

Comprehensive and rigorous monitoring and tracking is essential to understand the participation of all HE students in mobility programmes, but is especially important for students from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds. For example, tracking students who are mobile and in receipt of the SUSI grant nationally would both help to understand participation patterns and inform the development of policy and practice. Tracking

post-mobility is also important and it is recommended that the employment trends of students and graduates who participate in mobility programmes be tracked. Evidence from other countries indicates that mobility has a very positive impact on career progression and such data for Ireland will help reinforce the benefits of studying or placement abroad for both students and higher education institutions.

Improvements in data collection will also lead to improved scores on international mobility rankings such as Eurydice. Ireland's performance on the Eurydice mobility scoreboard is generally poor and does not fully meet any of the criteria for each indicator (with the exception of portability of grants). There is significant room for improvement across all indicators particularly in foreign language preparation and recognition of learning outcome and qualifications. Some aspects have been implemented for information and guidance at a national level as well as support provided to disadvantaged learners.

## **3. Funding**

Finance remains a key concern for students considering participation in mobility programmes. This report fully supports the Government commitment to exploring increased financial support for students in the Higher Education System Performance First Report, which identifies 'student finance (including reluctance to forego part-time employment)' as a barrier to international mobility. There has been a low uptake of Erasmus top-up grants available to students from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds. This report recommends further investigation into the reasons for this, giving particular attention to situations where other financial supports are suspended while students are on mobility. This report fully supports the Governments intentions to explore engagement with the European Social Fund (ESF) as a mechanism to support the participation of socioeconomically disadvantaged students in Erasmus+.

## **4. Awareness and Outreach**

To promote equity within mobility, a national campaign around the benefits of and options associated with outward mobility should be considered by the Irish Government and the HEI's collectively. Additionally, information on international mobility opportunities should be included in national outreach and access programmes such as the DARE/HEAR schemes and SUSI grant scheme to raise awareness of mobility opportunities and benefits before students enter third level.

## 5. Challenges and risks

### Successful reform will increase costs

If widening participation initiatives are to be successfully introduced at the national level, there will be associated costs for government and for HEIs, firstly in establishing robust systems and a delegated agency and secondly, because the reforms will increase demand. However, the benefits to the individual and ultimately to the country will counterbalance these initial costs, and comprehensive data systems will assist in highlighting these benefits at both macro and micro levels.

### Brexit

Brexit uncertainties must be considered in the context of Erasmus+. The UK is one of the top five destinations for Irish students undertaking Erasmus+ programmes, and first place for students on placements. While the National Agency for Erasmus+ in the UK supports continued full membership of the programme for the UK through to 2020 and Universities UK is requesting government to secure continued participation in the programme post-Brexit, Irish HEIs must be encouraged and supported to find alternative partners to minimise the risks associated with the UK not being part of Erasmus+ post 2020. Ireland's national agency for Erasmus+, the HEA has successfully co-ordinated a number of potential partner networking events for higher education institutions and should be enabled to support more.

## B. At the HEI level

Enabling and encouraging outward mobility requires HEI's to adopt or implement a number of strategies. The strategies recommended here have been identified from the institutional analysis of the two higher education institutions who participated in this project, the University of Limerick and Limerick Institute of Technology. These recommendations closely mirror findings in the Universities UK report, Widening Participation in UK Outward Student Mobility: A picture of participation, and will be utilised to create a toolkit of best practice for European higher education institutions seeking to widen participation in outward mobility programmes.

### 1. A whole of institution approach is required

#### Outward mobility is supported and encouraged across both institutions and across all levels of management, support and administration.

Outward mobility is explicitly referenced in the strategic plans of both institutions mirroring the emphasis on outward mobility at government levels. Both institutions actively support and encourage integrated outward study or placement programmes within certain programmes offering students a range of study/placement opportunities from the beginning of their course.

The importance of outward mobility is explicitly supported by senior management in both institutions and this is reflected in the targets institutions set for outward mobility.

**Academic buy in** is crucial to successfully embed and widen participation in outward mobility programmes. This is reflected in the institutions structured approach to embedding internationalisation across the institutions via Head of Faculty responsibility, as well as academic representation on internationalisation committees.

Coordination of outward mobility is supported by senior management and includes an effective, well-resourced body – generally the **international office** to ensure quality and appropriate outward mobility programmes for students. The International office also acts as a vehicle for effective collaboration with other key stakeholders of mobility such as the access office, disability office, co-operative education office and academic departments. It also acts as a catalyst for effective promotion of outward mobility such as social media campaigns and outward mobility events. These activities are broad and resource-consuming and it is recommended that international offices be adequately resourced to undertake these roles effectively.

Comprehensive internationalisation across institutions requires meaningful outward mobility. Senior leadership within institutions should support staff and students who put themselves forward as **mobility champions** and empower these champions to integrate and promote outward mobility programmes across institutional plans, strategies, initiatives and activities. Encouragement from academic staff helps prevent immobility.

The findings reveal that institutions should recognise that **one size does not fit all** and a diverse range of offerings is necessary. Both long-term and short-term study and placement opportunities exist as options for students in these two HEIs and this is valued by



students. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds value a work placement option as it offers valuable work experience as well as remuneration to offset the costs associated with mobility. Placement also offers a short and sharp immersion opportunity that is attractive to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Higher education institutions need to be agile in responding to varying student needs.

## 2. Information, promotion and support

Encouraging mobility among students requires an awareness of the benefits of mobility. Student respondents believed this awareness, along with encouragement from the institution was paramount for decision making.

Both institutions provide clear and comprehensive information on the outward mobility options available to students. Clarity and transparency is crucial for students and parents to fully understand the benefits of outward mobility, what it will involve and its potential impact.

Both institutions utilise a number of promotional channels to promote outward mobility, from on-campus events to social media campaigns. It is important for institutions to track and review the success of such campaigns and events and measure their effectiveness in widening participation. Both institutions reference the effectiveness of face to face meetings through initiatives such as annual study abroad fairs on campus. Social media is regarded as highly effective at raising awareness and sharing success stories. The power of alumni cannot be underestimated in helping promote the benefits of mobility. The student voice of outward mobility alumni is a key ingredient for raising awareness of the benefits of outward mobility.

A positive mobility experience is more likely when the student is actively involved in all aspects of the mobility programme and takes ownership of it. Expectations are also managed when students become more invested in all aspects of organisation and planning. It is especially effective at the organisational stage to help identify specific practical and academic needs, particularly for students with disabilities.

**Structured pre-departure training is essential to successful mobility.** Student respondents indicated that such training should take candidates through the application process and offer full preparation for study or placement abroad, including personal checklists, practical tips on safety, accommodation, cultural issues, phones and communications, bank accounts, public transport etc.

For students with a disability the influence and support of parents, friends and the institution are vital for a

successful study abroad period and they need to be included in all aspects of the process.

*“It is harder with a disability, so sometimes people might not even consider it. My parents were always very supportive of me going and we went over to check out the campus and city a few months before I went on Erasmus which helped ease the fear a lot.”*  
(Disability Student at the University of Limerick)

Pre-departure training should also seek to de-mystify the academic processes of other institutions and explain other academic issues which arise abroad.

UL’s study abroad module (*Preparation for External Work Placement and Study*) is an effective model here.

### **Students also focused on the following areas where they would like to see changes and/or greater support offered:**

**Language/Cultural barriers:** A competent knowledge of the local language and local culture is necessary to navigate the practical aspects of living in a new country. The online mandatory language course to prepare for Erasmus+ should be available on mobile phones via an app. Other useful recommendations included, pre-departure language exchange programmes on campus, financial support to arrive early at host institutions to undertake a language course and offer extra credits for language exchange programmes.

Students felt that a greater choice of English speaking courses and placements would widen mobility to students who do not possess the necessary linguistic skills. Equally a greater number of modules would encourage participation, as some students reported a limited choice of modules that they could study at the host institution.

**Homesickness and Culture Shock:** Many students reported the impact of homesickness, loneliness and culture shock as significant issues, with some feeling they didn’t fit in or belong to the new institution. Connecting with past students before arrival and engaging with buddy systems as well as orientation programmes are crucial to overcome these barriers. A consistent contact point with the home institution at all times helps alleviate anxiety and stress associated with the settling in period of studying abroad. Students also reported a sense of being out of place upon returning to the home institution and suggested a de-briefing support session would be of value to help reacclimatise to life at the home university.

**Reconnaissance trip:** Students cited reconnaissance trips as an effective way to overcome anxiety and significantly help preparations to study abroad, however the cost may prohibit if funding is not available.

For students from disadvantaged backgrounds pre-departure visits may be necessary if 'inclusion' is to be fully embraced. An advanced planning visit, (APV) allows the student and support person to visit the new campus/city for a couple of days in advance of the placement and provides an opportunity to map their way around the city, meet their new mentor/support person, explore accommodation options and so on. Other Erasmus+ programmes have an already well established APV option that is promoted as good practice in supporting students with few opportunities to engage. There are opportunities here for cross-sectoral sharing of practice and resources.

Occasionally, even with the best information and support systems in place, students may not always engage in advance of departure. Upon reflection, some of the student respondents in this study agreed that they could have taken more responsibility during the planning phase of their mobility programme, especially on practical matters such as cost of living and accommodation. While an information session was arranged by their institution and delivered by Erasmus+ alumni, the outgoing students did not always engage with the information indicating the timing of the session might be an issue as well as the follow up.

### 3. Effective planning and review is necessary

Institutions must help the student plan effectively when they are considering an outward mobility programme and need to ensure that a comprehensive needs analysis is conducted with each student planning a study/placement abroad. It is particularly important to capture the student experience and ensure it is listened to and reflected upon. To assist this, existing and new mobility partnerships should undergo rigorous risk analysis particularly for students from disadvantaged or minority groups, this enables a positive experience for the student and helps remove barriers to mobility. Any new partner visits conducted by higher education institutions must take into consideration the needs of all students so they can integrate and participate fully at the university or placement institution. It is also critical that there is a clarity of roles and responsibilities between the home and the host institution.

### 4. Funding of mobility programmes

Students agreed that they would not be able to participate in the Erasmus programme without the Erasmus+ and SUSI grants. The prompt, timely and early payment of these grants is important for students to be able to deal with the high costs of settling into a new higher education institution.

Loss of a part time job is cited as a barrier to mobility and therefore the option of part time work is very important to students. Supporting students to find suitable part-time work should be prioritised as this may encourage mobility. It is recommended that HEI's provide clear information on all the grants and other financial support available to students at the institutional and national level. This could involve the development of information guides on the cost of living in the different countries. It is also recommended that HEIs ensure the timely payment of upfront funding to cover settling in costs such as accommodation deposits and travel cards. Students also indicated that funding towards the end of the study/placement abroad was an issue and additional funding would be welcome at this juncture.

Both institutions provide support to help students retain any existing grants they are receiving while on an outward mobility programme.

Institutions need to provide clear advice to students on what their funding options are. The cessation of a funding grant while on mobility is a serious barrier to mobility and must be addressed by institutions to help widen participation.

### 5. Other

#### Cross sectoral sharing of practice and resources.

It is recommended that HEIs in Ireland engage with each other and with best practice from other European projects and HEIs for example, *'Going to the Edge: a toolkit for international officers'* to improve access for students with disabilities on study abroad programmes or recommendations on the inclusion of higher education students and staff with physical, mental or health related conditions in the Erasmus+ programme by the European Commission.

Erasmus+ programmes such as the EVS – European Voluntary Service (EVS) allow an early (and short) overseas exposure for students. UL are currently piloting this approach, giving credit to students who participate in these programmes. This may help to overcome the lack of representation and diversity in the cohort of students who engage in the mobility process.

A structured space on campus for reflection and feedback, focusing on themes of citizenship and social cohesion would be useful for returning students. This could also be fed back to the HEI as a whole and further encapsulated into pre-departure training.



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