

From Erasmus to Erasmus+

A story of 30 years



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In 1987, the European Union member states agreed the Erasmus programme, which focused initially on exchange of university students. Now, thirty years on, all sectors of Education Training and Youth work are included in today's Erasmus+. Jim Mullin discusses the programme's wide-ranging agenda which includes travel to other countries for staff training and teaching activities, workplace traineeships, youth exchanges, cooperation projects between schools, universities, research institutions, community groups, national authorities, and more.

It may be hard to imagine, particularly for younger readers, but thirty years ago we didn't have a simple name for the practice of heading off to another European country for part of your education. But since the European Union member states agreed the programme in 1987, 'Erasmus' has become a widely accepted term for travelling abroad for a period of study, job-shadowing, training or exchange. Even more importantly, it has become a widely accepted concept. The programme may have begun with a focus on exchange of university students, but today's Erasmus+ takes in all sectors of Education, Training and Youth work. It is a wide-ranging programme that allows people to travel to other countries for staff training and teaching activities, workplace traineeships, youth exchanges, cooperation projects between organisations like schools, universities, research institutions, community groups, national authorities and more.

More than nine million people from schools, adult education organisations, youth groups and vocational colleges, as well as universities, have taken part in these activities since 1987. These participants' enthusiasm for exchanging learning, and experiencing different cultures, has helped make European mobility a normal part of educational life.

That figure of nine million indicates the popularity of Erasmus+, but it was the diversity and wide reach of the programme that really stood out at the official 30th anniversary celebration in Strasbourg, France in June 2017. Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, and Antonio Tajani, President of the European Parliament, presented 'nine millionth Erasmus+ participant awards' to one person from each of the 33 countries in the programme. Ireland's recipient was Michael Ward, a 23-year-old youth worker. Michael participated in a European Voluntary Service exchange to Estonia in November 2013, and went on to lead youth exchanges in Finland and Georgia. As an Irish Traveller, Michael believes that international exchanges help to remove prejudices and give participants opportunities they might otherwise not have known existed. He was

recognised for his extraordinary Erasmus+ story and for inspiring others with his experience and achievements.

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Michael's fellow recipient Katja Nigsch from Liechtenstein had a similarly inspiring story, which began in the offices of the Connacht Tribune in Galway! She completed a traineeship at the newspaper in 1999 as part of her vocational training to become a graphic designer. Initially shy when speaking English, the traineeship not only improved her language skills but gave her the confidence to live and work internationally.

These stories, along with those of the 31 other award winners, were a testament to the transformative power of Erasmus+ on a personal level. Erasmus+ brings people from different backgrounds together and provides them with the competences they need to lead independent, fulfilling lives. Experiencing life in another European country opens the eyes of Erasmus+ participants: it provides them with a fresh look, new ideas and an eagerness to contribute to their communities. In fact, 88% of those who took part in European school partnerships say that they increased their social skills and four out of five participants in youth exchanges say they are more likely to participate in society.

However Erasmus+ has also had a wider impact on the organisations that run projects, and the programme has shifted its focus in recent years from individual beneficiaries to building European experience into the life of an organisation, and ultimately into the wider community. In Ireland we often think of community as a shared locality, like a school, club, parish or workplace. But there are other things that bring us together, whether a shared identity, a passion, or a goal to be achieved, and communities form around these too. The effect of Erasmus+ on these communities is striking.

Erasmus+ continues to change and innovate in response to the needs of communities.

In a recent Léargas study of Erasmus+ Vocational Education and Training (VET) work placements, Irish organisations active in VET highlighted that the programme had helped them connect with local employers and consequently improved job prospects for all their students, not just those who had travelled on placements. Erasmus+ work placements in Europe have also had a direct effect on VET courses in Ireland: for example, Greenhills College of Further Education in Dublin decided to add the computer scripting language PHP to their Software Development course because of feedback from VET students who had found it essential in their software work placements in the Netherlands.

This move from an individual to organisational focus shows one of the strengths of Erasmus+: it continues to change and innovate in response to the needs of the education, training and youth work communities as well as the wider societies we live in. Erasmus+ long ago moved beyond straightforward mobility exchanges between countries and now has three distinct project types, known as Key Actions. Key Action 1 allows organisations to send staff, trainers, students, or young people abroad on exchanges, placements, to study, or for professional experience, such as job shadowing, training, volunteering, or work experience. Key Action 2 is for strategic partnerships that facilitate cooperation between

organisations for innovation and the exchange of good practices. Key Action 3 supports policy reform and is open to the youth sector only.

From 2018, a new strand will be added to Key Action 2 that will directly address the needs of schools to carry out partnerships with other schools. This strand will be part of Key Action 2 and called “School Exchange Partnerships”. These partnerships will enable schools across Europe to work together directly on projects that address key issues like reducing early school leaving, improving attainment of literacy and numeracy skills, and increasing participation in Third Level education. Organisations can get support for international meetings, joint learning activities, and short-term staff and pupil mobilities. Crucially, the new strand will make it easier for schools to run these kinds of projects on a smaller scale. There will be a shorter and simpler application form, and project applications will be assessed only against those of a similar type – making for a more level playing field. The European Union have allocated €280 million in funding to schools in all programme countries for Key Action 2 partnerships in 2018, so there will also be a significantly increased budget.

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The best advice we in Léargas can give to schools that want to get involved in these partnerships—or to any organisation that wishes to take part in Erasmus+—is to ‘start with the end in mind’. Erasmus+ is a programme with a clear mission of change: to modernise teaching and learning across Europe, to improve key competences and skills, and to support social equity and inclusion. Similarly, a successful Erasmus+ project is one that sets out to achieve real change in an organisation and its target group. This might be a change in the skills and competences of learners; of knowledge about a particular educational issue; or of behaviour and attitudes. Projects need to address the identified needs of the entire organisation rather than of individuals. Organisations must agree what their development or strategic priorities are, and use Erasmus+ to pursue these goals.

Europe has changed immensely in the last thirty years; and the last few years in particular have brought a new wave of economic and social uncertainties, from bailouts to Brexit. However there are always others in the world that share the values of our communities and are equally committed to them. If you don’t know those people, perhaps it’s just that you haven’t found them yet. Perhaps the greatest strength of Erasmus+ is that it can connect you with other people who share the same goals, and allow you to actively work together to achieve them.