



European Funding Opportunities in Higher Education: The Role of Erasmus+ in Fostering Institutional Growth and International Cooperation in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive overview of the Erasmus+ Programme as a strategic funding mechanism for higher education institutions (HEIs) and other organisations operating in the field of education and training. Drawing on Pixel's extensive experience as project coordinator, the paper examines the programme's key action lines most relevant to higher education: Cooperation Partnerships (KA2) and Capacity Building projects. The paper outlines the four horizontal priorities that cut across all sectors of the programme (Inclusion and Diversity, Digital Transformation, Environmental Sustainability, and Participation and Active Citizenship) and discusses how these priorities shape the design and evaluation of project proposals. A selection of nine approved Cooperation Partnership projects and six Capacity Building projects coordinated by Pixel is presented to illustrate the range of eligible activities, partnership configurations, and deliverables that characterise successful applications. These examples span topics from computational thinking in STEM teacher education, to the integration of artificial intelligence in language learning, to the promotion of intercultural dialogue and emotional intelligence in secondary schools. The paper then provides practical guidance on the formulation of competitive project ideas, emphasising the importance of needs analysis, innovation with respect to the state of the art, consistency between objectives, activities and results, and clear identification of target groups. Special attention is devoted to the Capacity Building strand, which funds cooperation between European HEIs and partner-country institutions across regions including Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and the Western Balkans. The paper concludes by positioning the Erasmus+ Programme not merely as a funding source, but as a driver of systemic institutional change and international networking, and by offering concrete recommendations for institutions approaching the programme for the first time.

Keywords: Erasmus+, higher education, cooperation partnerships, capacity building, European funding, internationalisation

1. Introduction

The Erasmus+ Programme is the European Union's flagship initiative for education, training, youth, and sport. With a budget of approximately 26.2 billion euros for the 2021–2027 programming period which nearly double that of its predecessor, it represents the most significant multilateral investment in knowledge and human capital in European history. For higher education institutions, the programme opens a wide spectrum of opportunities that extend well beyond student and staff mobility: through its cooperation and capacity building strands, Erasmus+ funds the joint development of curricula, teaching methodologies, assessment tools, training packages, and policy recommendations, in partnership with institutions across Europe and the world.

This paper aims to provide practitioners such as researchers, lecturers, academic coordinators, and institutional leaders, with a structured understanding of how the programme works, what kinds of projects it funds, and how to translate institutional priorities into competitive proposals. The analysis draws on Pixel's direct experience managing Erasmus+ projects since the earliest programme generations, and on a curated set of recently approved projects that exemplify best practice across different sectors and geographic contexts.

2. The Erasmus+ Programme: Structure and Priorities

The current Erasmus+ Programme is structured around three Key Actions. Key Action 1 (KA1) supports learning mobility for individuals. Key Action 2 (KA2), the primary focus of this paper, funds Cooperation Partnerships and Capacity Building projects. Key Action 3 supports the development of policy and cooperation at the systems level.



Across all actions and sectors, four horizontal priorities are mainstreamed: Inclusion and Diversity, Digital Transformation, Environmental Sustainability, and Participation and Active Citizenship. These priorities are not optional thematic labels: they are embedded in the evaluation criteria and applicants are expected to demonstrate how their project contributes meaningfully to at least one of them.

The programme is open to a wide range of eligible organisations: higher education institutions, schools, vocational education and training (VET) providers, adult education centres, and youth organisations. Eligible countries include the 27 EU member states, EEA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway), and a number of candidate countries. For Capacity Building projects, partnerships extend to third "partner" countries across the globe.

3. Cooperation Partnerships in Higher Education (KA2)

Cooperation Partnerships fund transnational projects that develop, transfer, and implement innovative practices in education and training. In the higher education sector, the programme specifically encourages proposals that stimulate innovative teaching and learning practices, develop STEM/STEAM curricula, support digital and green capabilities of HEIs, and promote innovation and entrepreneurship. Projects receive grants of up to 400,000 euros and run for two to three years. The expected deliverables are concrete and transferable: joint curricula, training packages, teaching sources, assessment tools, guidelines, toolkits, case studies, and policy recommendations. The emphasis on tangible intellectual outputs distinguishes Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships from more general research grants and ensures that funded activities generate resources that outlast the project itself.

3.1 Examples of Approved Cooperation Partnerships

To illustrate the breadth of eligible activities, the following projects, which are currently coordinated by Pixel, have been selected as representative examples.

The Co-Think project (<https://cothink.pixel-online.org/>) targets the development of future STEM teachers' skills in computational thinking. Its main outputs include a framework for computational thinking teaching, a microcredentials-based course, and a suite of lesson plans and student assignments.

The DAI project (<https://dai-project.eu/>) addresses the integration of artificial intelligence in the teaching of Italian as a foreign language. Deliverables include a teacher training course on AI in language education, a repository of AI-based resources featuring a personalised chatbot, and a learner corpus derived from student interactions.

The EME4EU project (<https://eme4eu.pixel-online.org/>) promotes English-Medium Education (EME) as a lever for university internationalisation, producing a collection of good practices, decision-maker guidelines, and a teacher training package.

The BRIDGE project (<https://bridge.pixel-online.org/>) centres on intercultural dialogue in higher education, delivering a digital museum on integration, micro-credential training courses, and governance guidelines for HEIs.

The POEMS project (<https://poems.pixel-online.org/>) focuses on emotional intelligence in secondary education, producing self-assessment tools, training materials, and a research publication.

The READY project (<https://readyreading.eu/>) equips primary school teachers with tools to identify and address literacy disadvantages, including game-based intervention toolkits.

These examples demonstrate that successful Cooperation Partnerships share several structural features: a clearly identified gap in practice or policy, a transnational consortium with complementary expertise, a set of outputs designed for reuse beyond the project, and a robust dissemination and sustainability strategy.

4. Capacity Building in Higher Education

The Capacity Building strand of Erasmus+ (KA2 HED) is designed to foster structural cooperation and reform in higher education in third "partner" countries. Unlike Cooperation Partnerships, which operate among Programme countries, Capacity Building projects explicitly require partnerships between HEIs in EU member states and HEIs in partner regions.

The expected impact on partner-country institutions is wide-ranging: modernising HEIs, improving the quality and accessibility of higher education, promoting innovation and better governance, increasing digital competence for students and staff, strengthening links with the private sector, aligning academic provision with labour market needs, and enhancing employability and entrepreneurship.



4.1 Examples of Approved Capacity Building Projects

Pixel's Capacity Building portfolio spans multiple partner regions. In South Africa, the ProTELDE project (<https://digitalskills.uj.ac.za/>) equips HEI and TVET lecturers with skills to identify, use, and create digital teaching sources for business and economics education. The AFJ project (<https://entrepreneurialskills.uj.ac.za/>) targets the employability and entrepreneurial skills of graduates and the pedagogical capacity of educators in business disciplines.

The Ted-SOEP project (<https://www.tedsoep.org/>), also based in South Africa, promotes self-directed learning methodologies and the integration of open educational resources in STEM teacher education. In Costa Rica, the EthicalAI project (<https://www.ethicalaiucr.info/>) establishes a regulatory framework for the ethical use of AI in university settings and develops training resources for higher education lecturers.

In the Palestinian context, the CARE project (<https://care.edu.ps/>) strengthens HEIs' capacity to deliver high-quality, practice-based Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) training, modernising curricula in line with EU standards and promoting EU-Palestinian institutional cooperation. These examples reflect the global reach of the Capacity Building strand and its potential to generate lasting structural change in partner-country higher education systems.

5. Formulating a Competitive Project Proposal

Irrespective of action line or sector, competitive Erasmus+ proposals are built on a rigorous process of project idea formulation. Based on Pixel's experience evaluating and coordinating applications, five stages are critical.

First, applicants must conduct a thorough analysis of programme objectives and priorities, ensuring that the proposed project is demonstrably consistent with the guidelines published in the relevant Call for Proposals and the Erasmus+ Programme Guide. The European Commission's Funding and Tenders Portal (<https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/>) is the authoritative reference for this stage.

Second, a state-of-the-art analysis is essential. Project proposals should demonstrate awareness of previous initiatives, lessons learnt, and existing results in the field. The Projects and Results section of the Funding and Tenders Portal provides searchable access to previously funded projects and should be consulted systematically.

Third, target groups must be identified precisely. This entails defining the profile of intended beneficiaries, conducting or citing a robust needs analysis, and articulating the motivations that make these groups receptive to the proposed intervention. Erasmus+ explicitly values the bottom-up approach: projects should be driven by the real and documented needs of practitioners and learners, not by the interests of applicant institutions alone.

Fourth, project objectives must be consistent with identified needs, realistic within the timeframe and budget, and clearly outlined in measurable terms. The logical chain from needs to objectives, activities, and results must be internally coherent and transparent.

Fifth, activities must be detailed, sequenced, and directly traceable to the stated objectives. The definition of results and deliverables must reference quantifiable indicators and be fully consistent with the planned activities and partnership resources.

6. Conclusions

The Erasmus+ Programme represents a unique opportunity for higher education institutions to access substantial European funding, develop innovative educational resources, and build durable international partnerships. Its value, however, extends beyond financial support: participation in Erasmus+ projects positions institutions as active contributors to the European Education Area and generates systemic benefits in terms of staff development, institutional visibility, and curriculum innovation.

For institutions approaching the programme for the first time, the advice is practical: begin by identifying an authentic institutional need that aligns with programme priorities, invest in a thorough state-of-the-art analysis, build a partnership with genuine complementarity across national contexts, and design outputs that will be used and sustained beyond the project duration. For experienced applicants, the challenge is to push beyond incremental improvements and propose genuinely innovative approaches that reflect the evolving priorities of the European educational landscape — including the ethical integration of

artificial intelligence, the transition to sustainable educational practices, and the deepening of inclusion agendas.

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