

## **POLICY BRIEF – European Commission**

### **How can the MENA region benefit the most from Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility**

#### **1. Introduction**

When looking at the Higher Education sector in the Southern Mediterranean region, one of the most striking features seems to be its overall rapid development and expansion following the recent reforms across the region as a whole, as opposed to the great variation in terms of political and economic backgrounds. Within this context, also the challenges faced by the various MENA countries in this very sector seem to be similar, as confirmed by the Union for the Mediterranean, which states that, currently, 32% of enterprises in some Southern Mediterranean countries regard the labour skill levels of graduates as inadequate and that from 15% to 32% of young people (15-24 years old) in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries are NEETs – i.e. not in employment, education or training. Furthermore, 25% of unemployment rates are among Higher Education graduates in the Arab countries of North Africa (<https://ufmsecretariat.org/what-we-do/higher-education-research/>). According to recent studies, the high unemployment rate is hitting especially traditional universities, due to the mismatch between what the labour market requires and what recent graduates may offer.

Against this background, a key driver for growth and improvement is, in line with the 4<sup>th</sup> Sustainable Development Goal, “an inclusive and equitable quality education”, as well as lifelong learning opportunities for all. More specifically, by 2030, “countries should provide equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and higher education, including university” (SDG 4.3). This shift is pivotal in MENA countries to satisfy the increasing demand for highly skilled and internationally qualified workers. Undoubtedly, cross-border tertiary education in its various forms, in particular international mobility, and internationalisation of Higher Education as a whole, could greatly enhance HE quality in the MENA region, while offering a great opportunity to avoid increasing expenditure due to raising number of local students, especially as foreign expertise and capital could thus easily be attracted. This is key considering the very young population (ca. 100 million people) in MENA countries who will be the future work force facing an increasingly international market. It should be recalled that the youth-led revolutions in the Arab world in 2015, where youth under the age of 25 represent an estimated and unprecedented 60 percent of the whole population in the region, have demonstrated its critical role in the transformation of existing political, economic and social structures in the Middle East and North Africa. They have heightened expectations for themselves and their societies but are frequently constrained by the economic and political realities in which they live. Hence, the beneficial impact of internationalisation developments, as the ones described above, go well beyond the educational sector itself.

A current trend towards enhancing internationalisation in the Higher Education sector has been witnessed in the whole MENA region, and the EU Erasmus+ Programme has added a valuable support instrument in this respect since 2015, with the introduction of the International Credit Mobility action (KA107-ICM). Nevertheless, there seems to be major challenges and hindrances limiting its full potential as spur for growth and better Higher Education quality.

In the light of the future follow up to the Erasmus+ programme, and the first results deriving from the recent introduction of ICM, this policy brief will focus on the current situation, challenges and input for

potential improvement in three MENA countries – Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia – which seem to share a similar framework if compared to other countries of the region concerned, especially in economic terms and despite the inevitable characteristics which differentiate them. These countries have been the recent targets of the Erasmus+ ICMED capacity building project – International Credit Mobility: a New Challenge in the Mediterranean Region (<https://www.icmedproject.eu/>). Based on a thorough mapping and Consultation Process about the current ICM status at institutional and regional level, the ICMED project, led by the University of Padova in close cooperation with other 5 EU and 6 MENA HEIs as well as two university networks, has endeavoured to contribute towards an innovative, effective and efficient management of International Credit Mobility in the MENA region, by strengthening staff capacity, implementing a comprehensive Training Programme, fostering information and sharing best practices in this field.

Notably, based on desk research and questionnaires/local interviews with all the interested target groups, the ICMED project has also endeavoured to highlight key challenges/issues emerged during the project, in the light of their potential influence on future policy actions. This has led to a consultation summary report and training week's reports, and a set of policy briefs bringing together research and local evidence to inform policy developments on ICM and Erasmus+ KA107 in particular.

The reason behind this policy brief is to draw relevant conclusions and provide useful input and recommendations so as to enable both policy makers (especially the European Commission) to take the measures needed to finetune and streamline ICM, as well as HEIs on the two shores of the Mediterranean sea to benefit the most from ICM management and implementation.

## **2. Higher Education in targeted countries**

Internationalisation is today seen as a pillar of Higher Education in the countries concerned. In the HE Strategic Plan 2015-2030 of Morocco, which aims at becoming the region's HE international hub with ca. 15.000 international students/year (Ministry data 2016), international cooperation is key for HE reform, through strengthened cooperation with foreign countries, new international partnerships, increased mobility and regional cooperation. Similarly, Tunisia has invested heavily on increasing HEI international attractiveness, triplicating (2011-2013) its foreign students (UNESCO 2014). The Tunisian HE strategy (2015-2025) focusses on improving HE quality and employability, mainly through international cooperation and mobility, which is also the 3<sup>rd</sup> pillar of the Algerian HE internationalisation strategy (2013). In all the targeted countries, training HE staff is also pivotal to implement government policy recommendations and actions effectively.

Quite significant challenges in the MENA region, however, are currently making the Higher Education sector struggling to keep up with globalisation and the demands for expansion and development of knowledge-based societies, especially the declining quality – which is also the result of the previous “massification” trend and rapid growth in number of students and graduates in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and the whole educational system. Tunisia, for example, is one of the three MENA countries with the highest share of graduates out of the whole population in the country. The MENA educational system seems to rely quite substantially on old fashioned teaching methods which do not support independent learning and analytic thinking and focus more on teaching needs and less on research, also resulting in high drop-out rates. While a common feature and even a requirement for Higher Education worldwide is that

teaching should be based on research, in many MENA countries a quite limited percentage of GDP, very often lower than 1%, is invested in research. This issue is, in turn, linked to the teaching staff quality. In Algeria, for example, a very small portion of teachers holds a PhD degree. This also results in a quite limited number of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> level degree courses, which are not fully in line with labour market needs.

Further hindrances seem to be the reduced flexibility of the system and the not fully adequate digitalisation measures in place, while the labour market urgently needs more diversified skills and degrees. Most Arab universities are teaching institutions, thus they do not produce the necessary specific skills needed in the labour market and business life, which is especially the case of the quite underrepresented STEM studies. Bachelor's degrees used to well satisfy the needs of jobs in the public service, yet this particular market is gradually coming to an end. Furthermore, alternatives to Higher Education like vocational schools are less widespread.

Another issue which seems to be strictly linked to the high unemployment rate, especially in Morocco, is the shortage of English-taught degree courses, as most of them are offered in either Arabic or French, and the students' limited proficiency or fluency in English, again resulting in a not fully adequate preparation of prospective graduates for the labour market.

Against this background, funding and quality assurance are two closely intertwined aspects which deserve special attention. On the one hand, Higher Education funding in Arab states is deemed to be limited if not insufficient, and mostly governmental. Nongovernment support seems on the contrary to be modest. This is partially due to the fact that enrolment in private education tends to be very low in some countries, for example in Tunisia and in Algeria, and that most MENA governments, including Algeria, have followed a policy of essentially free education at all levels of public education, whereby students are usually required to pay just a symbolic fee. Reflecting on HE financing policies in these states would therefore be appropriate, in terms of adequacy of spending, efficient use of resources, and equity implications of resource allocations. On the other hand, funding itself is not based on performance, and Quality Assurance mechanisms, much needed to link HEIs with international standards, seem to be not fully developed and exploited.

To conclude, MENA countries are also dealing with the great challenges affecting today's economies and societies, such as climate change and environmental issues, which have become top on the agenda worldwide and are ambitious targets included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 13). Extensive mobility schemes, such as the ones promoted by the Erasmus+ programmes, have a substantial impact on the environment. If it is highly likely that mobility will remain a key aspect of internationalisation, much still can be done to shift priorities and take measures to reduce its environmental impact. E.g. blended mobility which combines short physical mobility with more carbon-neutral forms of exchange could be a good tool to widen the scope of internationalisation and make global learning for all possible. Actually none of the Sustainable Development Goals, let alone climate action, can be attained without the notable contribution of the Higher Education sector. Thanks to research, HEIs are uniquely positioned to produce new knowledge and innovation to address global challenges and provide evidence for informed public policy, and while dynamics for change and transformation come from learning and teaching practices, their success and sustainability require support and coordination from the institution and the system (EUA's Trends 2018).

### 3. International Credit Mobility: an opportunity and a challenge

In this framework, International Credit Mobility, as a form of cross-border education, has so far proved to be one of the most significant innovations of Erasmus+ in Higher Education, as it offers a new model and challenge to improve HE quality, which could be highly beneficial for the Higher Education sector and beyond, among others for the following reasons:

- It provides the opportunity to benefit from an international research environment.
- It is a useful tool to overcome financial constraints and to widen participation.
- It is a useful policy to diversify and make programmes more relevant to respond to domestic needs, benefitting from newest technologies.
- It requires a transparency system for recognition and a strengthened accountability of HEIs, similar to international standards.
- Mobility projects enable European players to build bridges with partner countries and *vice versa* through cooperation. Notably, the thematic scope of the projects with partner countries frequently exceeds that of projects within the EU, for example in terms of methodology transfer and regional integration.

Nevertheless, the current ICM structure, as evidenced in the ICMED experimental study on the implementation of ICM so far in the countries concerned, shows major hindrances which inevitably limit its full potential. Building sustainable academic relations and achieving systemic effects is hampered by the combined effect of these factors, which could be summarised as follows:

- Difficulties in fully understanding KA107 templates and procedures.
- Not structured/formalised internationalisation strategies.
- High bureaucratic burden, especially concerning visas.
- Lack of proper institutional involvement and little/no involvement of the respective IROs in KA107 management. A preliminary need assessment by the University of Padova in cooperation with the Coimbra Group in autumn 2016 (CG Seminar on International Credit Mobility, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2016) showed that participation of MENA HEIs in ICM has so far strongly relied either on a single academic commitment or on pure institutional cooperation without the needed department/academic commitment.
- Lack of an overall harmonised framework in the procedures, from the application to the implementation stage: this includes strategic applications at both decentralised and central level, regional variations in project facilities and policies, and short-term contracts.
- Little involvement of local HEIs especially in rural areas in KA107, and ensuing difficulties in reaching out to international partners.
- Little experience of local staff in the application/selection procedures, in line with national regulations and EC transparency requirements.
- Lack of incoming candidates, often due to the political unrests and EU safety protocols.
- Difficulty to send young female students to Europe without family male companion.
- Reluctance of top-students to participate in ICM, as it would be difficult for them to then compete with non-mobile students.

- Language barriers (English vs French; Arabic): even today, a strong French influence can be noticed in the MENA Higher Education sector, including language, curriculum, degree structure and terminology, whereas English-taught courses are still in shortage and not all students master the English language adequately.
- Inadequate cultural preparation of prospective international students.
- Difficulty in the recognition, especially of PhD and staff mobility activities, also due to the lack of standardised procedures for credit conversion and recognition.

The list above summarises hindrances encountered in the project implementation as a whole; specific obstacles and hurdles, however, also regard each stage of the project lifetime. To this end, the ICMED Consultation Summary Report provides a useful input for a further analytical analysis of challenges posed by KA107 in its various implementation steps.

#### **4. Recommendations**

In the light of the current Higher Education developments and the spur to internationalisation, based on the evidence from desk research and ICMED findings between 2017 and 2019, the following general recommendations could be advanced at policy level:

1. The Higher Education sector needs strategies to be developed at national level for HE institutions to be able to allocate their budgets according to the national priorities. In this respect, the European Commission could contribute to raising MENA countries' awareness about the importance of such a strategic framework for education, skill development and mobility, which has a crucial impact on the economic and social future of the countries concerned. The role of NEOs could be enhanced for them to provide precious feedback to and liaise with local governments so as to push for such a strategic framework. Increasing the number of English-taught courses would definitely go into that direction.
2. A national strategy for a research policy is also highly required, to be financed in accordance with the national long-term needs related.
3. Participation of the industry and the private sector, especially in research financing, should be encouraged, for example through a more direct involvement in the course design, in the training opportunities and in the mobility schemes of students and staff.
4. To this end, national Agencies and governments should be informed about different institutional models and systems of cross-border delivery and what makes them effective.
5. Consequently, the training and selection of teaching and administrative staff is crucial: a major focus on research and international skills should become essential features in this respect to be looked for but also rewarded.
6. An internationally oriented Higher Education environment requires an efficient Quality Assurance system, whereby institutions are evaluated according to their performance, including that of their staff: efforts to develop a regional approach for accreditation and to set up a quality framework are needed, as is mutual recognition of qualifications between home and host countries.
7. Along the internationalisation route, joint research on best pathways for students and skilled labour mobility would be highly beneficial to strengthen the capacity of each country.

As student and staff mobility has proved to be a key factor in the strive for quality and international competitiveness in Higher Education, a special focus on Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility – and on how to enhance and streamline its implementation in the countries concerned – is highly needed, also with an eye to extending the European Higher Education Area beyond the physical boundaries of Europe to incorporate the three countries of the Maghreb in what would become the Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education and Research area. As a consequence, specific recommendations have been developed, based on the ICMED project analysis, which can be summarised as follows:

1. In the light of the future EU educational programmes, a more flexible approach would take successfully introduced incentives to the next level – thus giving the programme more weight within the Higher Education policy as well as achieving a better perception of the European Higher Education Area throughout the world.
2. A better planning would be recommended: this should for example aim to both extend the duration of contracts to a minimum of 5 years instead of the current 24 or 36 months, and push for stronger cohesion and harmonisation of practices (i.e. uniform templates), aiming at reducing the administrative burden too.
3. A global strategy for ICM in the region requires a central coordination action from the EC and can only take place through a stronger contribution of NEOs, for example in the setting up of standard and uniform procedures as well as in the release of guidelines. The EACEA and NEOs have hence a crucial role to play in harmonising procedures and establishing minimum common standards, not only in the MENA countries concerned but also hopefully in the whole region. For example, a database of all active ICM agreements and the opportunities available for potential candidates could be developed with the contribution of NEOs and published on the EC website. To the same end, the ECHE principles could be reminded by NEOs themselves, so as to make every project step transparent and clear. In the light of a Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education area, future programmes could ideally see MENA countries as potential signatories of ECHE themselves.
4. The lengthy and sometimes quite expensive VISA process could benefit from the setting up of a preferential channel for ICM candidates, whereby NEOs coordinate the gathering of applications at central level and cooperate more closely with consulates, so as to make them more aware of ICM too.
5. Implementing e-application tools would reduce the workload of both students and staff, especially in the evaluation phase.
6. Raising awareness of the programme and liaising with regional and national bodies concerned, including HEIs, is crucial for a better knowledge and dissemination thereof, and here again NEOs could play a clearer role and be more actively involved. This would imply a greater use of information sessions and social media promotion.
7. An active involvement and commitment from all the parties concerned would also imply a shift from the current unilateral project model – with a central coordination role pertaining quite entirely to EU HEIs and to EU National Agencies – to a shared coordination of ICM. This would contribute to a stronger involvement of the HE institutions concerned, but can only be aimed at once national and regional strategies are fully developed. To this end, communication and coordination between the sending and receiving institutions should be improved, so as to exchange

- information in due time and in a clearer way on the selection procedures and rules and ensure more transparency on the evaluation and selection criteria.
8. Networking activities between NEOs and NAs, between these bodies and HEIs, and among EU and MENA HEIs are crucial to identify hurdles in the various project stages, detect and disseminate good practices, share experience and grow together. In this respect, regular training involving NEOs, NAs and HEIs from the two shores of the Mediterranean could be planned to allow for more dialogue and comparison between what is in place in the various countries involved (both EU and MENA). The training would be useful for NEOs and MENA HEIs to deepen their knowledge about the objectives and uses of ECTS tools and so as to standardise internal procedures, by sharing good practices at national level and thus facilitating recognition of mobility activities.
  9. Similar networking activities could also be planned by adopting the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange – E+VE model ([https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual\\_en](https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual_en)), so as to limit mobility costs, streamline timing and allow for a wider and inclusive participation of all the interested parties, while also resorting to digital technologies, boosting cooperation among the various staff categories – teaching staff, learning designers, international officers, and employability staff – not only within the same HEI, but also among the various HEIs involved.
  10. In line with the previous bullet point, as the growth of e-learning activities, including MOOCs, has affected the widest number of countries concerned and MOOCs and other types of online learning seem to have the most potential for growth (29% of institutions are planning to develop them), E+ Virtual Exchange could provide an ideal support to physical mobility. It could also be a potential and valid alternative to reach out to those who cannot afford to embrace the E+ programme and have little or no access to international learning, thus adopting a more inclusive educational approach. Furthermore, such a model would significantly contribute to reducing the carbon footprint of mobility, a measure which is highly needed today as an increasing number of universities demand for carbon-neutral initiatives. The advantages of combining ICM and E+VE would hence be considerable: a) further push for innovation in the educational offer provision, b) enhanced blended internationalisation format, c) a strengthened focus on internationalisation at home, d) improvement of transversal competences and soft skills of participants, and e) limited environmental impact of international mobility. On the other hand, MOOCs and other online models, as well as Virtual Exchanges, could provide access to international expertise, thus enhancing quality and reputation of programmes with limited resources. Keeping in mind that Erasmus+ will soon be replaced by a new programme, further focus on boosting and encouraging virtual exchange and mobility would be required so as to build on the efforts made. Internationalising the curriculum and engaging in collaborative online international learning or virtual exchanges are important tools to support physical mobility, which could contribute to limit the risk of brain drain and benefit larger groups of students and staff.
  11. Encouraging the adoption of the E+VE model would also go in line with the need for further and better pre-mobility preparation courses, especially for students. Virtual exchanges also enable students to experience the cultural dimension linked to a physical exchange thanks to the interaction with peers and facilitators from different cultures and they can thus also practice both English and the host destination language prior to the exchange.

## 5. Conclusions on ICM implementation in the MENA region

The capacity to disseminate, replicate, operate and evaluate good practices is in any case needed in order to maximise the benefit of cross-border education. This requires streamlining and optimising of what has been carried out so far and further investigation on and sharing of already existing good practices, as the ones identified by the ICMED project. For example, previous successful experience in cooperation projects (e.g. Erasmus Mundus programme) has quite often resulted in more successful ICM projects and, in terms of information and promotion, the recording of videos by the staff who participated in an international mobility programme on their experience abroad, has been useful during info days or dedicated events. As regards the application stage, the creation of an IT platform to collect and fill in application documents has also proved to be a valuable tool. With reference to preparing students for the mobility experience, the introduction of general courses such as an eTandem project which resorts to the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange model and gathers international and local students in an online community, is a cost-effective and inclusive way to target cultural and language issues, and spur internationalisation at home. As a whole, the compatibility of local HE systems with Bologna Process related ones is indeed a relevant outcome to be attained, ensuring not only recognition and transparency, but first of all the opportunity to speak a common language at Higher Education level.

Undoubtedly, the excellent general perception around ICM programmes, its usefulness and impact on employability of graduates and further training of staff does contribute to make it an important opportunity to develop the international dimension of the involved HEIs, both by providing learning/training/teaching opportunities abroad to students and staff and by offering more international learning/teaching opportunities at home to the whole academic community.

This policy brief and the three ones targeting the MENA countries concerned are aimed at providing new inputs and stimulating floor for discussion and improvement to the benefit of national and EU authorities, in the view of the follow up to the Erasmus+ programme. By doing so, the ICMED project will have hopefully contributed to enhancing the quality of the Higher Education sector as a whole and to streamlining the management and implementation of such an ambitious action as Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility.

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