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POLICY BRIEF - ALGERIA

How can the Algeria benefit the most from Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility

1. THE ICMED CAPACITY BUILDING PROJECT – INTERNATIONAL CREDIT MOBILITY: A NEW CHALLENGE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN REGION

A current trend towards enhancing internationalisation in the Higher Education sector has been witnessed in the whole MENA region, including Algeria, 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). Internationally-oriented HEIs have included this scheme among the already ongoing programmes of scholarships for staff or students' mobility, based on strategies aimed at enhancing the university international dimension. KA107 provides opportunities which are perceived as useful and important as they provide a further chance for the institution as a whole to open up to the increased international environment of the Higher Education sector. Nevertheless, there seems to be major challenges and hindrances limiting its full potential as spur for growth and better Higher Education quality. The ICM Scheme is a new challenge for MENA governments and HEIs. After more than a decade of successful cooperation under the Erasmus Mundus (EM) programme, partner HEIs were quite abruptly led towards a totally new scheme, with new rules and procedures. Furthermore, while the demand for staff mobility opportunities is increasing, the available funding and number of scholarships remain limited.

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 Algeria. This country, together with Morocco and Tunisia, has been the recent target 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, through 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. A series of quality interviews were namely conducted in the two ICMED partner HEIs in Algeria, with representatives of staff (10) and students (12) who participated in E+ International Credit Mobility exchanges, following the analysis of questionnaires on the same topic. A representative of the local NEO was also interviewed. This has led to a consultation summary report, 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 hence to draw relevant conclusions and provide useful input and recommendations, so as to enable Algerian policy makers to take the measures needed to finetune and streamline ICM, as well as Algerian HEIs to benefit the most from ICM management and implementation.

2. HIGHER EDUCATION IN ALGERIA

Algerian Higher Education has undergone quite significant developments and reforms since academic year 2004-05. Today, it features a substantial network of HEIs – with a twofold increase from 56 in 2005 to 103 in academic year 2015-16, spread out in a larger number of provinces – and a constantly growing student population. Just to provide some examples, 2,281,320 students (63% women) have completed a degree in Higher Education over the period 2004-2015 and the number of undergraduate students has increased by almost 82% in the same period. Also teaching staff has soared in the same decade, with a rise of nearly 120%, from 25,229 in 2005 to 55,746 in 2016 (Overview of the Higher Education System – Algeria, 2017). When looking at student capacity, HEIs were able to offer around 1,324,000 places in 2016, an increase by more than 200% in 12 years.

INTERNATIONALISATION SPURS VERSUS DEMOCRATISATION CHALLENGES

Efforts are being made to enhance employability prospects of future graduates, thanks to a closer cooperation with the socio-economic environment in various forms. Currently ongoing reforms are aimed at building stronger linkages between university and the industry (2014-18). Accreditation has also become a crucial aspect after recent reforms which have seen the establishment of two national bodies (the National Commission for Implementing Quality Assurance – CIAQES, and the National Assessment Committee – CNE) and the drafting of a road map based on a set of objectives aimed at enhancing the quality of the Higher Education sector and its assessment, in line with international standards. Yet the process is still undergoing and much needs to be done to accomplish all the tasks set forth. In line with such developments, measures have been taken at ministerial level to improve the performance of doctoral training so as to standardise such training from recruitment to graduation and ensure that it responds to the requirements of the labour market, with special focus on research, ICT, language and communication.

Internationalisation is now the 3rd pillar in the Higher Education strategy of Algeria, which is investing in international mobility, both incoming and outgoing, with currently more than 10,000 foreign nationals, from 61 different countries, studying in Algeria. Yet, similarly to other Northern African countries, Algeria is still recovering from past turmoil, and it takes time to rebuild the country and its infrastructures back to a fully functional level. The reforms carried out in the last few decades have indeed triggered a positive development in the HE sector, shifting from a) a focus on adapting the educational programmes to the new economic policy needs (i.e. the replacement of foreign teachers) to b) the replacement of French with Arab as language of instruction, then c) needed adjustments to the enrolment growth and the infrastructure densification, and finally d) the strong growth in the number of female students.

Nevertheless, challenges and hurdles still remain and need to be overcome. Despite the greater focus put on quality today, the results of the previous “massification” policies in Algeria are still visible. Massification, which was a core part of recent reforms, due to both the very high

percentage of young people in the country, but also to explicit policy choices undertaken by the government, led to a trend where quantity was until recently favoured over quality. Such democratisation trend was fostered by free access to Higher Education and the existence of university services at a very low cost. Higher Education, moreover, highly relies on public funding, and the state plays a central role in the whole education sector, whereas private support is still low, as is the number of private HEIs. Direct financial support for students from families with limited resources and for the best students, as well as support services such as accommodation, are guaranteed to a high percentage of students: 85% of Algerian students receive grants and more than 50% are accommodated by the National University Student Services Office (ONOU). Only recently have policy efforts been made to increase the use of English, while the use of Arabic as language of instruction, and its replacement of French, is still frequent. Furthermore, considering that the issue of research is also linked to the quality of the teaching staff in universities, the large numbers of teachers needed to look after a student body which is now estimated to be 1,500,000 strong, have to be trained to a high standard, whereas a sizable portion of teachers does not have a PhD degree. Policy makers in the field of Higher Education and scientific research are also faced with the need to establish an efficient high-quality system of training and research, while the whole HE sector features quite an informal management system and a certain instability in terms of researchers' body. These are among the main reasons why the Higher Education and scientific research sector in Algeria is not fulfilling its potential.

As evidenced above, Algeria has made considerable efforts throughout the years, but now a closer link is to be established between the HE sector and the practical needs of the labour market to reduce the youth unemployment, particularly among the skilled population. Hence, reconciling justified demands to democratise access to Higher Education with demands for high quality training is today one of the major challenges which Algerian HEIs have to face. This is even more needed to be competitive and encourage innovation in a fast-changing world shaped by the advent of the knowledge and information society and economic globalisation.

RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES FOR ALGERIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

With a view to further boost the internationalisation developments of the Algerian Higher Education system, and in order to ensure a smoother implementation of ICM and follow-up mobility schemes, several actions could be recommended for the Higher Education sector as a whole, to overcome the major obstacles identified above. The most relevant to this end are worth mentioning:

1. First of all, concentrating SMEs in certain regions, clustered around one or more university centres, can be an effective way to accelerate this internationalisation process, as hinted at by numerous theories on regional development.
2. It would also be advisable that the HE system is less centralised and opens the door to the private sector, for universities to be managed in parallel by both the private and the public sector. HE and research institutions need to have an independent management system, for research projects to make progress.
3. The HE sector needs new governance and new management methods, and an improved legal and organisational framework, while the budget for internships, training,

international cooperation, scientific research and technological development should be increased with keeping an eye on the effective management of this budget, so as to ensure that such investments are aimed at achieving the HE goals.

4. Continuous teachers and managers' evaluation is a good approach to set up a culture of university competitiveness and credibility. Quality education for universities and Productivity of research institutions should be the guiding principles in this respect. To this end, individual assessment methods should be improved and collective work between managers, teams, researchers, and universities is to be encouraged to support the links with the industry.
5. An "endogenous" research field should be created, by orienting researchers towards fields which could potentially benefit the Algerian economy, and internationalisation is an optimal way to acquire the needed knowledge and international expertise in this direction. One of the greatest challenges being faced by HEIs and research institutions today is to develop research (products, programs inventions, patents, methods and procedures, etc.) in the renewable energy and agriculture field to help the Algerian economy now and after the hydrocarbon area.
6. Carbon-neutral forms of internationalisation should also be investigated and be provided as an additional element to traditional forms of cross-border education, to reduce their substantial environmental impact, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals agenda (SDG 13) and the worldwide Higher Education efforts in place today for climate action.

As evidenced by the points illustrated above, the commitment of local, national and regional institutions is crucial for a true shift in the HE management system and an effective investment in regional and international cooperation, whereby Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility plays a key role and hence deserves special attention.

3. INTERNATIONAL CREDIT MOBILITY IN ALGERIA

MAIN CHALLENGES

Based on the ICMED findings and literature research, the implementation of ICM in Algeria seems to be hindered by a series of combined factors, concerning especially, but not exclusively, the preparation phase of both student and staff mobility. Such challenges can be grouped under the following main topics:

- In general terms, a quite limited overall participation in the relatively new ICM scheme can be noted in Algeria if compared to the other MENA countries. This is especially the case for those Algerian HEIs located in the most remote areas, which do not seem to have a fully adequate knowledge of the action and of the NEO's role either.

- There seems to be an excessive bureaucratic burden linked to ICM management and implementation, and the need for so many and – to a certain extent – complicated documents is not entirely clear, if compared to the administrative procedures normally in place within Algerian HEIs when dealing with mobility. Main administrative challenges include:
 1. Visa applications, as procedures are time-consuming and might delay departure. Acceptance letters are sometimes required in the original version, which contributes to further delays in the whole process, because the applicant has to wait for the original document to be sent by the receiving HEI.
 2. Health insurance, as coverage is not always clear and delicate issues may arise in specific cases, such as emergency hospitalisation, whereby the mobile student or staff may discover that the purchased health insurance does not cover such costs in the host country.
- A shortage of staff dedicated to KA107 has been registered and the same staff declares not to have full access to training opportunities. In most cases, ICM personnel is not even aware of the university internationalisation strategy or such a strategy is sometimes missing. This results in a limited technical knowledge of the Action within Algerian HEIs and limited available expertise in terms of practical participation and management of KA107 projects. Moreover, the “reassuring” role of the former EM coordinator (EU or “Joint”) is no longer foreseen, implying a shift of responsibilities which not all HEIs are ready to shoulder.
- A limited capacity to welcome incoming mobility has been highlighted, due to the shortage of English taught courses and the not fully complete information available, which leads to a lack of attractiveness for international students.
- Procedures for the recognition of the experiences formally acquired abroad by students, regarding the equivalence and recognition of credits and grades, prove to be not enough or even lacking in certain cases. No credit recognition took place in the case of PhD students and the research activities they carried out, but a report in front of a scientific commission was instead expected from them upon return in their home institution. Lack or inadequate mechanisms of recognition for administrative staff were also noticed.
- A further aspect underlined was the way information about ICM is promoted at university level: available mobility opportunities together with the call for application are promoted through the institutional website, the Facebook page, posters, direct discussion with the interested persons also by phone and through mailing lists, yet the most effective tool remains the word of mouth among pairs and colleagues. Frequently, it is the EU partner institution which circulates information about KA107, based on the successful cooperation established beforehand. Unfortunately, though, information is sometimes not available for a long time, as is the case with the call for applications, which may result in a lower number of candidates if compared to the positions available.

- To conclude, according to the field of study, dissatisfaction emerged as to coordination of mobility activities by scientific supervisor, especially in the case of research activities, where specific research goals were not always set.

Interestingly, significant consensus was obtained among the various categories interviewed. As a matter of fact, both students, staff and the NEO representative agreed that the major hindrances to be overcome for a smoother implementation and management of ICM are the ones illustrated above. They also suggested best practices already in place, while the project findings enabled to further reflect on future actions and steps to take in this respect, which will be outlined in the following two paragraphs.

BEST PRACTICES IDENTIFIED

A series of best practices identified by the ICMED project is worth mentioning, as they contributed to increase the effectiveness of the selection process and/or the quality of the mobility experience itself. Such best practices should be shared so that KA107 projects in place in other HEIs of Algeria and the MENA region as a whole may hopefully benefit from their implementation.

1. The sending HEI organised an interview session to test and certify the applicants' English knowledge for those destinations where English language proficiency is a compulsory requirement. By doing so, applicants could benefit from a free-of-charge internal service set up by their home institution, instead of paying fees for a test to be made at private language centres. Further initiatives for free-of-charge English tests at home institutions could be investigated.
2. Some beneficiaries could attend a local language course at the receiving HEIs, which was useful not only to learn or improve one's knowledge of a foreign language, but also to facilitate integration in the local community.
3. An IT platform has been adopted locally, so as to ease collection and filling in of documents in the application stage. This results in a planned improvement as far the technical management of the application process is concerned.
4. It is widely known that new technologies have recently had an important impact on Higher Education, with particular reference to foreign language teaching. Consequently, measures, though minor ones, were taken to implement new ways of teaching with new technologies, techniques and methods. In this respect, language centres are the most appropriate place to promote second language learning.

Similar best practices could indeed ensure a more effective implementation of ICM and also other international mobility schemes, and need to be further exploited.

RECOMMENDED FUTURE ACTIONS

The ICMED investigation process has brought to light significant ongoing trends in the way Erasmus+ ICM is managed in Algerian HEIs. Useful feedback was provided on how to improve processes and practices currently in place, as well as a series of recommendations to increase the quality of the

mobility exchanges, to the benefit of both the individual participants and the single HEI as a whole. Recommendations have been grouped under specific headings:

1. Promotion activities: the programme needs to be promoted more on social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, etc., rather than through academics and the website, and “Study/Info Days” should always be envisaged, during which the potential beneficiaries could find out more information about the exchange programme. Communication channels to promote the initiative should hence be further differentiated.
2. Communication and coordination between the home and host HEIs should be improved. Information should be exchanged and shared in due time and in a more complete and clearer way: such information should specifically concern the rules and procedures to participate in the mobility exchanges and the selection criteria set by the receiving university.
3. Dedicated Erasmus+ unit: both local students and staff have underlined the need to create an Erasmus+ office, which should comprise trained academic and administrative staff with expertise in the Action, dedicated full time to manage ICM and, in more general terms, Erasmus+ activities. Specific training activities should be set forth for local ICM staff, who should be all familiar with the local internationalisation strategy, and academic/administrative staff with roles related to the institution internationalisation strategy should benefit from a series of mobility exchanges, in order to improve their technical expertise. Dedicated information sessions and training events on the Action, targeting staff of Algerian HEIs, are also very much needed to better promote the Action and to circulate detailed, accountable and technical information in order to increase both the awareness of and the expertise on the ICM scheme. The training activities could focus on the way ICM is managed, analyse the programme rules and regulations, explain the principles of the Erasmus Charter and the different phases of the Action including the application to ICM calls, while also looking at the official application documents. Thus, more harmonised procedures could be put in place in terms of application, selection (including appeal procedures, selection committee and transparency of criteria), preparation to mobility (including the various forms of administrative support ensured), assessment, follow up and recognition of the activities carried out abroad. In this way, moreover, a network of International Relation Officers will be created within the various Algerian HEIs, who could share the practices in place at national level.
4. Networking events among Partner and Programme country HEIs should also be encouraged, such as the one organised in Rome in October 2017 with a focus on the MENA region, as they are crucial to promote better communication, increase mutual knowledge and trust by personal interaction. Similar networking activities could also be planned by adopting the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange – E+VE model (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.

5. Innovation in educational provision. Apart from the adoption of new methods for foreign language teaching described in the previous paragraph, innovative education forms also regard ways to encompass both traditional teaching with alternatives enabling a student-centred approach and the opportunity for global learning. This is the case of the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange E+VE model, an innovative way for young people to engage in intercultural experiences online, aimed at fostering mutual understanding and skills development. By enhancing transversal competences and soft skills, and reaching out to groups with little or no access to international learning, E+VE projects can provide a valid support for ICM, either as additional international component to an already existing course, or as a pre-mobility activity offered by the partner International Relations Offices of the home and host HEIs, with a focus on language and culture preparation of prospective international students. Students will thus have the opportunity to share their views on various topics launched by trained facilitators and discuss with their peers in their future host institution, thus practicing the language and learning a bit more about the host culture. 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. 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.
6. Monitoring: a stronger focus should be put on the impact analysis of the implemented mobility exchanges, and its benefits for both the individual beneficiary and the involved institutions.
7. Widening the offer of English taught courses: efforts should be made to further internationalise the curriculum, by increasing the number of English taught courses, especially in those disciplines which are useful for the further development of Algerian economy, so as to attract international students and expertise, and hence further contribute to endogenous research. This can only be achieved through a closer cooperation between the various university units. To this end, such educational offer should be advertised more consistently, by providing fully complete information about similar courses.
8. Improving relations with NEO is sometimes required, especially in those cases where there is limited knowledge about their existence, activities and role. The NEO plays a key role in promoting Erasmus+ KA107 (together with other relevant actions of the E+ Programme) towards Algerian HEIs, boosting the visibility and the exploitation of results at national level, as well as collecting data, monitoring and evaluating the results of the action concerning each participating Algerian HEI. Yet, it is highly recommended that its role is enhanced so as to coordinate the gathering of visa application, by liaising with consulates in order to create a preferential channel for KA107 applicants and with other NEOs in the MENA region, EU NAs and the EC to participate in networking events and encouraging sharing of experience and practices.

4. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON ICM IMPLEMENTATION IN ALGERIA

Undoubtedly, the Algerian Higher Education system as a whole requires further crucial efforts to fully embrace the already ongoing internationalisation trends. To this end, building on the successful EU experience with Erasmus within Europe, by enlarging its scope so as to create a Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education area, is a target which Algeria is aiming at, together with other MENA countries. In this respect, Erasmus+ KA107 is perceived as an important opportunity to further develop the international dimension of the involved HEIs, by both providing learning/training/teaching opportunities abroad to its students and staff and by offering more international learning/teaching opportunities at home to its academic community, especially thanks to international visitors. Such cooperation projects are deemed to bring positive outputs not only to the participants in the mobility exchanges, but also to their institutions. A high satisfaction level has been noticed among those who could benefit from an ICM experience: Erasmus+ exchanges were confirmed to open minds and horizons and improve multicultural and communication skills. More self-esteem and trust in participants' abilities to work and perform in the academic environment are among the key beneficiaries' outcomes. At institutional level, existing cooperation with historical HE partners in Programme Countries can be further consolidated through ICM and new ones be developed with new institutions. In order to increase such benefits, as well as the number of mobility opportunities, a higher participation of Algerian Higher Education Institutions in this Erasmus+ mobility scheme is desired by both the involved HEIs and the Algerian NEO.

The HEIs concerned have some knowledge of the Action, thanks to information events organised by the NEO, ongoing cooperation with long term partner universities in Programme Countries and personal contacts with peers in Programme Countries HEIs. The active presence of the International Office Directors of the involved HEIs is fundamental to coordinate, supervise and manage the HEI participation in the Action at local level. Nevertheless, the number of human resources working in ICM should be higher and special training on the Action and mobility opportunities should be dedicated to this staff, so as to strengthen their knowledge and technical expertise. Ideally, an Erasmus+ unit should be created within Algerian HEIs to deal with the various Erasmus+ (and follow up) initiatives.

First and foremost, administrative burdens are to be alleviated and this is only feasible through a revision of the management structure, both within each HEI but also at national level, whereby a stronger coordination is needed especially when dealing with visa applications. Communication is also crucial for the success of the Action and more transparency as well as harmonised procedures are to be implemented in all the various project stages, which is favoured by intense networking.

With reference to ongoing ICM Inter-Institutional Agreements, the quality of the funded mobility exchanges could be improved through a series of actions. On the one side, these can take advantage of good practices developed by the Algerian HEIs to respond to their needs or face specific problems in individual mobility cases. Such solutions might be applied to other cases as well. On the other side, Algerian HEIs could also benefit from the experience of partner universities in the Programme Countries, by sharing knowledge and practices, as well as analysing their

procedures concerning ICM management, which could then be adjusted and adapted to the context of the Algerian HEIs. To this end, networking events are again crucial so as to enable the various interested parties to share their views, challenges and identified solutions.

To conclude, ICM can indeed enhance the international dimension of Algerian HEIs, yet this in turn requires a more attractive educational offer, which encompasses both a wider selection of English taught courses, as well as innovative educational methods, to be integrated into the traditional courses or to provide additional opportunities to learn and grow in a more inclusive, global perspective.

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