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POLICY BRIEF
FOR MOROCCAN AUTHORITIES

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POLICY BRIEF – MOROCCO

How can the Morocco 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 Morocco, 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 Morocco. This country, together with Algeria 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 Morocco, with representatives of staff (4) and students (5) who participated in E+ International Credit Mobility exchanges, following the analysis of questionnaires on the same topic. A representative of the Moroccan Education Ministry was also interviewed, as the local NEO staff was being renewed at that moment. 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 both Moroccan policy makers to take the measures needed to finetune and streamline ICM, as well as Moroccan HEIs to benefit the most from ICM management and implementation.

2. HIGHER EDUCATION IN MOROCCO

The high rate of young population in Morocco (60% is under 30 years of age) and the quick increase in the university population (almost one million student at this moment) have led to a growing interest in international mobility among Moroccan university students and staff. Morocco is namely the country with the most significant internationalisation experience among the neighbouring Northern African countries. Considerable commitment is hence required to strengthen academic and administrative staff capacities on the various aspects of Higher Education internationalisation, with a special focus on ICM.

DEEP REFORMS TOWARDS A MORE INTERNATIONAL AND EFFECTIVE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Morocco is one of the MENA countries which has undergone the deepest structural transformations and taken the most significant steps to open itself up internationally, particularly to the EU, as evidenced by the reforms implemented in the last 15 years, which have led to important achievements, especially in terms of expanding capacity and revising the educational architecture and curricula, along with the decentralisation and autonomy of institutions. In particular, it is worth recalling the 2013-2016 action plan to consolidate the 2009-2012 emergency programme and remedy identified weaknesses.

Yet, despite all the efforts made, the Moroccan education system is still suffering from chronic weaknesses. To this end, a vision of reform from 2015-2030 entitled 'For equity, quality and promotion at school' has been drafted by the Higher Council for Education, Training and Scientific Research (CSEFRS), followed by a Preliminary Strategic Plan 2015-2030 for the Higher Education and Scientific Research sector. The strategic vision is aimed at reinforcing achievements, suggesting solutions for pending crosscutting issues and implementing the necessary cuts, by establishing a new educational system based on three broad fundamental principles: equity and equality of opportunity, quality for all and promotion of the individual and society. Measures to be taken include, among the others, further diversification of teaching languages, the development of diversified and innovative educational tools, closer involvement in the economy and knowledge society and consolidation of Morocco's place among the emerging counties.

Very importantly, a further consolidation of the cooperation with the EU but also with Africa, in particular sub-Saharan Africa, is aimed at. A growing number of foreign students is registered in Moroccan HEIs, which is the first French-speaking African country to welcome African students (more than 75% from sub-Saharan Africa), and the second overall after South Africa. Moroccan students can benefit from a number of mobility opportunities, funded by both the local government and international programmes, including Erasmus+. The number of foreign students is

constantly increasing and almost all of them receive grants by the Moroccan government. A key feature of the Moroccan HE system is that free education is ensured to all HE students, both Moroccan and foreign ones.

Promoting new partnerships with HEIs and consolidating the already existing ones are two central pillars in the Moroccan internationalisation strategy, as is the attempt to constantly adjust teaching to the needs of the society and the economy, also thanks to structural reforms aimed at contributing to solve crucial issues as climate change and the environment. Greater attention is now also being paid to ICT, the development of innovative teaching technologies and tools including distance learning, the intercultural dimension and linguistic diversity in the curricula.

Quality assurance is also an ongoing trend which is crucial for a further enhancement of the Higher Education system. Notably, this has brought to the creation of a National Agency for the Evaluation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education and Scientific Research, within the framework of the 2013-16 strategy, and to higher university autonomy, which includes the setting up of an internal quality system.

The continuous effort to improve the educational framework is also due to the need to support the massive roll-out of HEIs (exceeding 450, with an increasing portion of private institutions or partnerships) and the soaring number of students in the Higher Education sector, which has nearly trebled over the last decade, rising from 308,000 in 2009-10 to 822,000 in 2017-18, and almost hitting 900,000 students in 2018, registering an increase by as much as 200% in the period 2015-2016. The rate of enrolment (above 30% in 2016) in Higher Education has also grown substantially; this is another fundamental aspect to consider when analysing the Higher Education sector in Morocco, which features a young population and devotes about 6.6% of its GDP to education (2013) – a slightly higher percentage if compared to other MENA countries.

A CHALLENGING SCENARIO

Yet, the deep reforms carried out have not provided a straightforward solution to one of the major obstacles to qualitative teaching and learning in Moroccan HEIs, i.e. overcrowding. The exponential increase in the number of students has not been matched by the same increase in infrastructure, equipment and human resources, especially teaching staff, in public universities. This has led to huge differences between selective schools and open-access institutions, which welcome almost 80% of the total student population, and to high dropout rates, as approximatively 27% of undergraduates leave in their first year and 58% do not finish their full degree course, while only 17% complete their degree within three years. Recent “massification” trends and university funding have hence resulted in a two-speed Higher Education system in Morocco, where good governance is consequently even more needed today to reverse such malfunctions.

The shortage of teaching staff and the need for teachers’ adequate training and recruitment are to be dealt with urgently, to ensure the much awaited shift to a truly qualitative Higher Education system which is in line with international standards. The adoption of a new system of promotion, currently based on seniority, is urgently required to this end.

A further hindrance to an effective Higher Education system is the issue of graduates' employment rate and employability, on which increasing attention has recently been put, so as to assess the quality of the skills acquired by students and adjust teaching accordingly. Students graduating in general open-access HEIs are less likely to find a job than those who hold a vocational qualification or graduate in a very specific discipline such as engineering or business and management – highly requested in the labour market in both the industry and service sectors. Nevertheless, most of Moroccan workers are today “unqualified” (62.3%).

The high unemployment rate among educated young people is mainly due, among other reasons, to the overall lack of jobs, and the mismatch between the training courses offered and the real needs of the economy, despite the constant endeavours to adjust teaching accordingly. A further reason hinted at is that too many students graduate in humanities and social sciences (75%) which are mainly taught in Arabic, as opposed to science subjects, where the main language of instruction is French. At THE Emerging Economies Summit in May 2018, senior university leaders have openly called for more non-science courses in French, Spanish and English, rather than Arabic, especially in the light of the very lucky geographical position of Morocco and its proximity to Europe, as a way to ease the deepening graduate unemployment experienced by Morocco.

BEST PRACTICES

The mismatches observed in the Moroccan Higher Education sector could be effectively overcome through a good governance system and further university independence, as the strategic vision of the 2015-2030 reform seems to aim at. This requires a diversification of funding sources, whereby the State continues to be the main source, yet the participation of the private sector, local authorities and other partners is foreseen, as is the introduction of enrolment fees, with the application of an automatic waiver for low income families.

With reference to teaching staff recruitment, both highly qualified holders of PhD degrees need to be hired but also international expertise, so as to compensate for the lack of teachers especially in public HEIs. In this respect, also teachers' training is crucial especially to enable them to share their experience with foreign professors specialised in fields which will ease students' entry into the job market upon graduation.

Scientific research is another feature which deserves special attention for qualitative Higher Education, by financing the creation of research centres, specialised master courses and doctoral schools. There should consequently be a new system of promotion of teaching staff based on scientific measures of performance. Scientific production hence needs to be developed considerably, for Morocco to perform better in the African ranking list. Today, it is ranked only 6th in Africa, after South Africa, Egypt, Tunisia, Nigeria and Algeria, while a more adequate position for Morocco should be at least the 3rd place, which it used to occupy until 2005.

The most recent reform in place (as of academic year 2020-2021) is aimed at further opening up Morocco to more international education systems, especially those in Anglophone countries, by adopting the Bachelor degree as recommended by Moroccan HEIs and leaving the French *Licence* system, which has evidenced several failures. This should also encourage the mobility of

Moroccan students to international universities, through various schemes as Erasmus+ ICM, whose impact on the Higher Education system in Morocco will be illustrated in the following paragraph.

3. THE ROLE OF ICM IN ENHANCING MOROCCAN HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY

HEIs in Morocco have always been very active in international programmes, as witnessed by their intense participation in previous initiatives such as Tempus and Erasmus Mundus, and in the most recent Erasmus+ programme. In particular, the KA107 mobility scheme continues the ongoing trend towards a more international environment which Moroccan HEIs have embarked on in the last few decades. In the light of the above described scenario, Erasmus+ ICM provides a win-win solution for the Moroccan Higher Education sector, as it provides the international expertise needed to further improve the teaching quality and to ensure teachers' training, and it also spurs a further internationalisation of curricula, which will thus be more in line with the market needs. The most recent reform towards a Bachelor degree structure which will substitute the previous *Licence* one will greatly benefit from ICM and in turn further increase the number of mobile students.

It is precisely because of ICM crucial role in encouraging internationalisation within the framework of the reforms recently undertaken by Morocco in Higher Education, that major hindrances and obstacles limiting its full potential, as described below, need to be urgently overcome, while best practices should be features to further build upon.

MAJOR CHALLENGES IN ICM IMPLEMENTATION IN MOROCCO

Among the hurdles which seem to hamper ICM management and implementation the most, also based on ICMED pilot project results on the state-of-the-art in 2 Moroccan HEIs, the following ones require concrete actions and commitment from all the parties concerned. It should be recalled that the aspects illustrated in this policy brief are the outcome of the analysis undertaken with a specific selection of targets, yet what emerges from desk research seems to be in line with the ICMED findings, which hence adequately depict the overall picture of Erasmus+ KA107 implementation in Morocco.

- Information and promotion: not always are information sessions envisaged and a scarce use of social networks has been highlighted, which results in a limited knowledge about the initiative and the need for potential participants to look for further information on their own. This is also due to the shortage of staff in charge of managing the whole international mobility process. Furthermore, participating staff is frequently not aware of the existence of an institutional strategy concerning international mobility of staff or ways to attract incoming exchange students.
- The high bureaucratic burden has been signalled in all the phases of the mobility process (too many documents to be completed), but more in particular during the application phase, as it concerns especially the issuing of visas, and difficulties have been pointed out in

the process of obtaining invitation letters. The number of requested documents is also higher than desirable, while a rather low support seems to be sometimes provided by IROs at home institutions. Mobile staff too faced some difficulties in preparing the application package (e.g. preparation of the Europass CV and the working plan). Those with expertise in international relations noticed that administrative aspects are the main obstacle in the whole mobility experience, starting from the learning agreement to the recognition process, and in their minds it is very complex to deal with the different standards in terms of application, nomination and admission procedure, and also with the different deadlines applied by the various partner universities.

- With reference to the preparation for the mobility exchange, while there is overall great satisfaction with the services and support provided by host institutions in the process of preparing studying/working/research plans, participants highlighted the not always complete information regarding some practical aspects of the mobility, such as insurance conditions (for example how to proceed in case of health assistance is necessary) and a complete lack of language and intercultural preparation. Also participating staff complained about the lack of dedicated training or preparation for the exchange.
- The shortage of staff dedicated to and trained in international mobility makes the whole process very difficult, especially considering that the application process is too burdensome to be handled by one person, as is the case in many Moroccan HEIs, no matter how efficient or motivated the person may be.
- Lack of full transparency in the evaluation and selection process have been pointed out by both students and staff. The whole process is perceived as unclear and not equitable. Information published does not provide exhaustive details on how the selection would be made (phases and criteria), the composition of the selection committee and the educational opportunities available. The appeal procedure is another aspect which is frequently unclear or missing in the call for applications, while lists of applications received, eligible candidates and selected students are not often published. With reference to staff, only those responsible for international relations and therefore for the management of international mobility programmes seem to know the selection process in detail.
- Despite the high level of satisfaction with the mobility experience as a whole and with its impact on participants' personal and professional development, some faults have been detected in the recognition of activities carried out abroad by PhD students and staff, as no proof of recognition is issued for the first, nor is there any institutionally established mechanism of recognition in place for the latter category (e.g. specific weight/extra points in promotion processes). The issue of recognition of international mobility at PhD level is rather tricky and underdeveloped, probably because no credit system is used. Quite surprisingly, moreover, with the sole exemption of the staff in charge of international relations, the interviewed staff seem not to use the skills and knowledge acquired during the mobility experience in their daily work.
- To conclude, action is also needed to reverse the general limited information and knowledge, among students and staff, about the role, tasks and sometimes even the

existence of the local NEO, which mainly performs promotion and data collection tasks. In this respect, it should also be pointed out that there has been an interim period during which the Moroccan Ministry responsible for Higher Education and Scientific Research has performed the tasks usually entrusted to a National Erasmus+ Office, as the current NEO has just recently started to operate. This might be a further reason behind the limited knowledge among Moroccan HEIs about the existence of this body and the role it plays.

If it is true that most of such difficulties are experienced by other MENA countries too, yet finding solutions to these issues requires a customised approach, which takes into account Moroccan economic, social and educational peculiarities.

BEST PRACTICES IN PLACE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE ACTIONS

When describing the state-of-the-art of Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility in Morocco, it is also worth signalling the best practices identified, which are to be shared among the various HEIs in the country and beyond so as to further build upon them.

- For example, the outstanding support provided during and after the mobility experience by both the home and the host institutions is highly appreciated and confirms the great efforts made by Moroccan HEIs to promote staff and students' participation in the Erasmus+ ICM scheme, despite the limited staff available to work in this field. Direct contact and meetings with beneficiaries upon their return are among the good practices in place in some HEIs.
- Another best practice seems to be the recognition mechanism of activities carried out by students while abroad (with the sole exception of PhD candidates), which seems to be clear and quick in most of cases.
- The compulsory video recording that all staff participating in an international mobility programme from one of the HEIs concerned must provide upon their return to report on the experience they have carried out, has been identified as another good practice, and proves to be very useful for dissemination and promotion purposes.

Several initiatives and actions may also be recommended to ensure a proper and effective implementation and management of the KA107 action, in the light of the critical aspects emerged above:

1. In terms of promotion of the mobility scheme, a wider use of social networks (such as Facebook and Twitter) and the Internet, as well as dedicated promotion by academic and administrative staff, would prove to be useful information sources. Involving former exchange students who have already benefitted from a mobility experience in any information session or event organised to inform the university community on the international mobility opportunities, would also certainly encourage other students to participate in the exchange scheme.

2. One of the principles of the Erasmus+ ICM is clarity and transparency, as transparent and clear information is required in all the project stages. More detailed information on all the conditions of the mobility grant and on the health insurance should for example be provided. Furthermore, selection criteria should be agreed by the two universities and disseminated well in advance and a clear and accessible appeal procedure should be established and included in the call for application.
3. Harmonising administrative procedures and deadlines, including application mechanisms (tools, platforms, deadlines, documents, etc.), of participating HEIs would facilitate the participation in the programme and improve the process effectiveness. Having templates, for example, for the different documents required in the application stage would significantly help applicants. The EACEA could hence provide templates, minimum standards and/or a common working framework (e.g. model for the call for applications, deadlines, formal appeal procedures) for all the Programme Country HEIs participating in the E+ ICM, and share them with the respective NEOs in the MENA region, including Morocco. This could facilitate the work of Moroccan HEIs when preparing the calls for applications, selection and nomination of grantees and would guarantee a clearer and more transparent process.
4. All the institutions involved in the ICM scheme should strive to significantly reduce the number of documents to be prepared and submitted. A deep analysis of the mobility related paperwork is therefore required.
5. Action should be taken at university management level to invest in the recruitment of more and better prepared staff to work in the International Relations area, so as to create – in case it does not already exist – a formal International Office with trained staff to assist potential candidates in the whole mobility process (before, during and after). Having one dedicated staff responsible for international mobility in each department/faculty would also be useful to this end.
6. A comprehensive training plan for the International Office staff of Moroccan HEIs should be designed and approved of by all the HEIs taking part in the E+ ICM scheme. The training should focus on the main needs emerged in Morocco with reference to internationalisation issues, i.e. the academic and administrative management of international mobility, especially of incoming mobility flows, and the services offered to the received students and staff. Furthermore, staff should be trained on the ECTS system and especially on its potential implementation in Morocco, as well as on the different aspects concerning academic recognition, so as to be able to provide more detailed information on the learning agreement and on the ECTS system to candidate students too. The opportunity to implement joint training courses delivered by Programme Countries HEIs, with the participation of not only Moroccan but also other HEIs in the MENA region should be considered, as this action would be aimed at exchanging good practices to further internationalise Higher Education, which is crucial today to enhance ICM management and implementation. Such joint training courses could also be delivered through the innovative, carbon-neutral tools available, such as the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange model (https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual_en), which will enable staff to be trained online

and share experience with international counterparts without leaving their own office, and thus saving precious working time, while also reflecting on crucial topics thanks to the input provided by trained facilitators. Notably, the best training for administrative staff would also be that they experience international mobility and go through the process themselves. This would mean that there should be forward planning so that the prospective International Relations Officers complete a mobility exchange before taking up their positions.

7. Participating HEIs should agree on a minimum level of language proficiency and accreditation system. Preparation and accreditation in foreign languages are namely viewed as a major challenge by the NEO too. The sending university should provide courses to meet the set level, and the host university should provide follow-up courses. These could be linked to complementary intercultural activities. In this respect, the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange model could be useful to combine language and intercultural preparation activities in a sort of eTandem project carried out by the local IROs or Language Centres in cooperation with the respective IROs or Language Centres in partner HEIs. Future outgoing students may participate in such a project prior to their departure, by joining an online community, together with international students from the host destinations, who could in turn practice the target language and deepen their cultural understanding. Similar preparation activities would be useful to integrate the high potential of digital technologies with innovative educational methods, adopting a peer-led approach and enhancing students' transversal skills. Adequate preparation to the mobility exchange should be taken care of by both the sending and hosting institution.
8. A more operative relationship between the NEO and the HEIs taking part in the E+ ICM scheme should be fostered. This would favour a better knowledge of the NEO functions and tasks among those HEIs participating in the scheme.

The recommendations advanced above could significantly improve the effectiveness of the ICM scheme and its impact on the Moroccan HE sector. In this respect, an additional point should be considered in the light of current and future KA107 developments: especially in the view of the local NEO and Ministry, a significant role will also be increasingly played by international internships, as the ones foreseen in the ICM scheme, in pushing the HE internationalisation process even further and in developing the skills required as well as boosting graduate students' employability in Morocco.

4. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS ON ICM IN MOROCCO

Although much has still to be done to further streamline the implementation and management of the ICM scheme in Morocco, results obtained provide nevertheless evidence that the mobility experience is deemed to have a very positive impact on the personal life as well as on the academic and professional careers of both students and staff. Furthermore, Erasmus+ KA107 enables to consolidate already existing relations between the institutions concerned, so as to lead to additional cooperation programmes such as co-tutelle agreements, to the benefit of students, staff and the institutions concerned.

Concerning internationalisation of HEIs in a broader sense, strategic plans should be designed and approved to this end by the highest authorities in all the HEIs involved in ICM. Key elements should be identified in the respective internationalisation strategies: objectives, stakeholders and indicators to quantify the impact of the ICM mobility scheme at institutional level.

Another feature emerged is that not all the principles and rules covered in the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE 2014-2020) are always observed, especially that of transparency of information throughout the whole project. In this respect, also the dissemination of information about the Erasmus+ programme and the opportunities for international mobility offered by E+ ICM scheme should be enhanced.

The excessive bureaucracy behind the various project phases, in particular the application process, is also highlighted, leading to the conclusion that more and better trained staff is needed to deal with (Erasmus+) international mobility, at both academic and administrative level. Participating HEIs should fully support and facilitate specialised training for the staff in charge of managing and implementing mobility programmes, for example on the potential implementation of the ECTS system in Morocco.

Special attention should also be paid to the importance of guaranteeing full recognition of the study/research/training period abroad. Despite the great satisfaction registered among participants, with particular reference to the impact and relevance of the mobility period abroad, mechanisms to ensure the effective recognition of PhD and staff teaching or training activities are still missing and should be established by the home HEIs, in close cooperation with the local authorities, the NEO and the partner HEIs in Programme Countries.

To conclude, it may well be stated that all the actions, recommendations and best practices needed to streamline and enhance the ICM scheme implementation and management require first and foremost the commitment by all the HEIs concerned on both shores of the Mediterranean to share experience and join forces, for a true and effective harmonisation and improvement of the whole Higher Education sector to take place.

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