



Covid-19 and its implications on the Erasmus+ programme.
ESU/ESN Webinar from the 20th of March 2020

Q1. What were the actions from the European Commission so far?

The European Commission (EC) is in close contact with the national agencies (NA). National agencies are responsible for the management of Erasmus mobilities. Students witness different degrees of disruption at the moment. Considering the Covid-19 situation, the EC provides NAs with support to address the different issues and scenarios taking place on the ground. The EC wants to give a flexible framework with enough marge de manoeuvre for both NAs and higher education institutions (HEI). The EC does not want to come up with descriptive rules in order to allow solutions tailor-made to the individual needs of the students.

The EC recommends to HEIs and NAs the usage of the “force majeure” clause to address any situation of students on the ground, to prevent as much as possible a negative impact on the students themselves. The EC encourages HEIs to provide online courses for both students in host and home countries and to recognize the ECTS earned through these online courses in order to prevent any disruption in the students' curricula. The implications of triggering “force majeure” goes beyond recognition, it also touches upon grants. The EC will give HEIs as much flexibility as possible to prevent students from ending up in precarious situations. The EC furthermore invited NAs and HEIs to work closely with ESU and ESN in order to support affected students.

Q2. When the “force majeure” clause is being applied - can students resume their studies at the host institution later?

The concept of “force majeure” is very broad. In this broad and flexible framework, it is possible that students continue their studies in the host institution later, but this needs to be agreed between the student, the host and the home institution. The Commission will not impose any rules on HEIs regarding this issue because it does not fall into the ECs remit. The EC will continue to encourage NAs and HEIs to be as flexible as possible.



In the case of Italy, the national agency provides HEIs with guidelines, in order to help them to find the best solution for their affected students. Indeed it can be possible for students to resume their studies in their host institution later but many different aspects have to be taken into account and an agreement needs to be found between the home and host institutions.

Q3. When “force majeure” is applied, studies are terminated and the student goes back home, can this student receive the full grant to cover his/her extraordinary expenses?

The HEIs are ready to cater for the needs related to the current situation - through the “force majeure” clause it is possible for HEIs to cover extraordinary expenses for e.g. travel, insurance or rent. HEIs need to liaise with national agencies to evaluate these requests. It is too early to make assumptions. If the full grant is not recognised it is for the sake of the real costs being covered by the HEIs instead.

Case to case assessment of the students claiming the recognition of costs will be necessary. The “force majeure” always needs to be used in the best interest of the student. The EC encourages NAs to urge their HEIs to implement flexible tailor-made solutions for the students. Constant communication is taking place between NAs and the EC in order to accord their approach.

Q4. & Q5. Can the students go back home without applying the force majeure clause and be enrolled online at the host institutions? Will the online enrollment be recognised in the frames of the learning agreement by the home institution? How can we ensure that students receive the ECTS?

The “force majeure” clause can not only be used for cancellation, it is a broader framework, e.g. it can also be applied on interruptions and modifying the timing of the mobility in general.

It is possible that the students go back to their host institution and continue to follow the courses online. The EC encourages NAs to consider online courses as normal courses with standard recognition of ECTS in order for the students not to lose a semester in their curriculum.



Q6. If the host institution will require mobile students to travel back for exams, how can this be made possible through the Erasmus+ programme?

The EC is advising HEIs to conduct exams remotely (online). If physical attendance is required by the HEIs, it's up to HEIs whether they will support students with regards to their travel expenses or not. For example via organisational support funds. Ideally HEIs should not oblige any student to come back only for the sake of taking exams with physical presence. NAs hope that the case mentioned in the question will not take place and exams are being held online.

Q7. Would the European Commission, responsible for this program, abolish this ECTS requirement, so students will have more flexible solutions to pass the current academic semester? Currently, they are not sure if they can keep the money they already received, or if they should stay at a hosting university while the remote learning courses have not started yet.

The main word used by the EC is again flexibility. If students have already acquired some ECTS during the mobility these points should be recognised. If the HEI does not offer online courses and students have no chance to acquire the ECTS as set out in the learning agreement, the students should not be penalized. Here the "force majeure" should be applied, since it doesn't only apply to the grant of the student & the mobility but also to the learning agreement. The recognition of ECTS after all is up to the home HEI.

Q8. If due to COVID-19 the mobility is cancelled (in the application phase when students are already nominated to go for mobility at some point soon), should the students apply next semester again?

The European Commission recommends HEIs to provide a plan B mobility option to the current participants who could not participate in their Erasmus+ mobility due to Covid-19 situation. No selection procedure should be implemented for this plan B mobility. It's a matter of trust and goodwill between HEIs. The Commission provided a solution to prolong the activities in order to ease finding solutions for the problems occurring through Covid-19. In any case it is crucial that selection procedures must be transparent and equal to all students.



Q9. Is it possible for students to start their Erasmus programmes if their host institutions are offering online learning now due to Covid-19 as a substitute to the traditional learning?

Yes, nothing is preventing this from happening, but the final decision should and will be taken by HEIs. The implementation of this idea is possible and encouraged by the EC. Through this, students could take part in their mobility online from home. The EC encourages HEIs and NAs to recognise ECTS acquired through online courses.

Q10. Some students are finishing their Erasmus short mobility experiences during this period of lockdown, while their flights back home are being cancelled as well as valid visas expire. So students end up being stuck in a foreign country with no visa and no financial support. We believe that the National agencies can't solve this issue since it's up to the governments to issue visas, as well as it's not up to NEOs to provide additional grants. What are the actions of the Commission in this case? Do you collect such cases from countries? Can you issue letters to the Foreign affairs ministries and embassies?

The EC is aware of such issues and advises students to get in touch with national authorities and embassies. This needs to be handled by national authorities, embassies and national agencies. It is not in the ECs remit to solve these issues on the ground but the Commission will pass on the message to national authorities and demand increased sensibility for students affected by these issues.

Q11. Given that the European Commission shifts responsibility on National Agencies to decide and create a strategy for Erasmus+ in each country (in case of COVID-19), we need to know if the Commission intends to issue specific recommendations which should be followed by these agencies? Leaving decisions to national agencies can lead to chaos because of different solutions that would apply to students of the same hoisting institution. Does the EC analyse the most common and burning problems (those related to



financing, settlement of the stay, recognition of mobility credits) and establish recommendations?

The Erasmus+ programme has different stakeholders, each stakeholder has different responsibilities and they deal with the programme together. The EC has issued 5 notes so far with recommendations to NAs. The idea is not to try to address every

different situation, reason being that equal treatment of all students can not be guaranteed though such an approach. The overarching aim is to set a framework that gives as much flexibility as possible to NAs. Therefore this approach is chosen in order to deal with the different situations effectively. The EC will continue to issue recommendations for NAs in the process. National agencies are in close contact with each other in order to come up with a coherent approach. National agencies are trying cautiously to prepare for specific scenarios but reality is changing quickly, and scenarios that will not be mentioned will not be solved.

Q12. If a mobility is interrupted due to Covid-19, will those months spent in Erasmus be counted as months spent abroad? (since there exists a 12 month limit of mobility per academic cycle)

The “force majeure” concept can be applied, if needed in order to not have these months counted and therefore part of the maximum duration. The case by case decision lies with the national agencies and HEIs. HEIs can also impose the “force majeure” clause on the students without the students' consent and through that for example terminate the students mobility.

Q13. How will the crisis affect the decision regarding the funding for the new ERASMUS+ Program? What will be the long term impact of the situation?

At this point it is too early to tell, since the funding of the new program is linked to the negotiations of the *MFF. The priority today is dealing with the crisis situation until the end of it and minimising the negative impact on everyone. We currently see a huge increase in online learning and big potential for the aftermap. The EC thinks that this could be a potentially positive development in the overall European higher education system (through increased blended learning and online joint programmes).

A further measure taken by the EC is to prolong the deadlines of the calls for various Erasmus+ applications, e.g. Erasmus Charter. The EC is also in contact with the



European University Alliances on a day to day basis. Further information will be shared on the ECs website

Q14. Some Countries (e.g Pakistan) require returning students to prove that they are not infected, but availability of tests is scarce. Can the national agencies help?

The suggestion is to liaise with the diplomatic offices of the students' respective home countries. The current testing capacities in some countries are insufficient and NAs can hardly help.

Q15. Does the “force majeure” apply only if they withdraw from the Erasmus program, as written in the exchange contracts?

No, not only for terminating mobility. HEIs can apply the “force majeure” but only for the “benefit of the student”.

Q16. Since HEIs have to treat all applicants equally, does that mean that students who were already accepted but cannot go now, have to apply in the same pool as new applicants?

This could be the case, NAs are trying to reach an agreement with HEIs that allows equal treatment of all students while taking the issue into account.

Q17. Can you say anything about whether host universities can force students out of their accommodations?

Because of the COVID-19 outbreak, in some dorms all students are being asked to leave the dormitories, while international students don't have anywhere to go it is easier for domestic students to go back home. The specific cases would need to be assessed in order to make assumptions. The EC recommends national authorities to provide assistance and basic services such as accommodation and health services to international students.



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Q18. Can you say anything about the situation of the international students who aren't in the Erasmus scheme?

The ECs focus lies on Erasmus students. In general the best advice to international students is to contact the local embassies and national authorities of the home/host

countries. The approach towards the current situation depends very much on the funding institution. Federal ministries deal with it in different ways, also depending on the country.