

## 2.4 Erasmus+ capacity building for higher education. The European Union approach

The Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Higher Education (CBHE) action, initiated by the European Union, focuses on modernizing, internationalizing, and increasing the accessibility of higher education across partner countries outside the EU. This action has played a pivotal role in advancing educational systems by aligning them with contemporary global standards through projects that span legislative reforms, quality assurance improvements, and governance enhancements.

The article discusses the CBHE's strategy to foster intercultural understanding and cooperation between European institutions and those around the world. Through a variety of initiatives launched over decades—starting with the Tempus program and evolving through Erasmus Mundus to the current Erasmus+ framework—the program has significantly contributed to the educational and societal development by addressing systemic educational challenges and promoting equity and inclusion.

By engaging a wide range of stakeholders in these educational transformations, the Erasmus+ CBHE action ensures that the reforms are comprehensive and sustainable, thereby preparing global citizens to meet the challenges of a dynamic world. The ongoing commitment to enhancing educational standards globally not only underscores the EU's role in international development but also ensures continued improvement in educational access and quality in the years to come.

*Roberto Escarré, University of Alicante, Spain*

*Javier de León, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain*

### 1. Introduction

Education has always been considered one of the cornerstones of international development. Building human capacities has proven a useful tool in alleviating global inequalities. Given the consequences—poverty, wars and migration among many others—there is an urgent need for international organizations as the European Union to act. In this general framework, the EU has traditionally supported the modernization of education policies, systems and institutions, to help improve the lives of millions worldwide. It supports the global exchange of ideas and knowledge to improve the overall quality of education on offer. Building the capacities of higher education institutions helps provide students with an education that is more aligned to the needs of the labor market and society. It better prepares them to tackle the challenges of the modern world. The EU supports the internationalization of higher education institutions around the world. The resulting human interactions promote greater intercultural awareness and understanding between people from

different countries and cultures. It broadens their minds to different ways of being, acting, and seeing. It promotes greater tolerance and less prejudice —more necessary than ever.

The EU funds capacity building projects in higher education as a means to reach these goals. These are transnational cooperation projects between higher education institutions in Europe (so-called ‘program countries’<sup>2</sup>) and around the world (‘partner countries’<sup>3</sup>). They work together in a project partnership to bring about change. The focus of the projects can be at grass-roots level, working directly with professors, administrative staff and students. Building their skills, knowledge and expertise leads to a bottom-up approach to change in higher education institutions. EU capacity building projects can also work at a higher level with rectors and governing bodies managing the institutions, to introduce new quality assurance systems and management processes throughout the higher education institution. EU capacity building projects also work at national level with Ministries of Higher Education. These projects focus on reforming policies in areas such as quality assurance, the recognition of degrees or qualifications frameworks. Whatever the level, the aim of these capacity-building projects is ultimately to improve the quality of education for its key beneficiaries: the students.

## 2. Three decades of EU-sponsored higher education development: a brief review of capacity building programs

Over the past three decades, the European Union has consistently funded capacity building actions in higher education, targeting the enhancement of educational quality and relevance within partner nations. These programs were designed to bolster cooperation among EU Member States and these countries, and to facilitate people-to-people contacts, mobility, and academic collaboration. Reflecting shifts in the EU’s external development policy priorities, the changing global higher education environment, and the specific requirements of partner countries, these initiatives have undergone significant evolution. The following provides an overview of the principal stages and specific programs implemented during this period.

### 1990s: Initial Endeavours and the Tempus Program

Initiated in 1990, Tempus (Trans-European Mobility Scheme for University Studies) represented one of the European Union’s foundational efforts to bolster higher education in partner nations, particularly targeting the post-socialist states of Eastern Europe to support their transitions towards market-driven economies and democratic governance. As the program matured, it extended its reach to include the Western Balkans, the Mediterranean area, Central Asia, and subsequently, the Eastern European Neighbourhood and Russia. The focus of Tempus projects was primarily on curriculum modernization, governance enhancement, and the building of administrative capacities within higher education institutions.

2 Program countries include all 27 EU Member States plus additional countries like Iceland, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, and Türkiye that are part of the Erasmus+ Programme.

3 Partner countries are third countries not associated to the Programme usually are regrouped according to the EU’s external action instruments, namely the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation – Global Europe Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe) and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III).

## **2000s: Erasmus Mundus and Broader Capacity Development. Erasmus Mundus (2004-2013)**

Though best known for its role in fostering international master's programs and individual student mobility, Erasmus Mundus additionally played a crucial role in capacity building. It did so through fostering partnerships and projects that aimed to elevate the quality and global appeal of European higher education. During this era, Tempus underwent further development, broadening its inclusion of partner nations and placing a greater emphasis on institutional and systematic higher education reforms. These were aligned increasingly with the principles of the Bologna Process and the framework of the European Higher Education Area.

## **2010s: Integration of Efforts under Erasmus+. Erasmus+ (2014-present)**

The inauguration of Erasmus+ in 2014 marked a significant consolidation of EU educational initiatives, merging elements of both Tempus and Erasmus Mundus into a unified, comprehensive framework. The Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) component of Erasmus+ is designed to advance the modernization, accessibility, and internationalization of higher education systems in non-EU partner countries. Typically, these projects involve collaborative efforts among consortia composed of institutions from both EU Member States and partner countries, with objectives focused on enhancing curricula, governance, and management practices, thereby fostering robust academic cooperation.

# **3. Capacity Building in Higher Education action. The EU approach**

The Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) action is included under the umbrella of the Key Action 2 of the Erasmus+ Programme (Cooperation among Organisations and Institutions). The following is a summary of the action, extracted from the Erasmus+ Programme Guide (2023).

## **3.1. Scope and objectives of EU Capacity Building projects**

In the framework of the Erasmus+ Programme, EU Capacity building projects are transnational cooperation projects based on multilateral partnerships, primarily between higher education institutions (HEIs) from Programme and eligible Partner Countries. They can also involve non-academic partners to strengthen the links with society and business and to reinforce the systemic impact of the projects. Through structured cooperation, exchange of experience and good practices and individual mobility, capacity-building projects aim to:

- Support the modernization, accessibility and internationalization of higher education in the eligible Partner Countries.
- Support eligible Partner Countries to address the challenges facing their higher education institutions and systems, including those of quality, relevance, equity of access, planning, delivery, management and governance.
- Contribute to cooperation between the EU and the eligible Partner Countries (and amongst the eligible Partner Countries).

- Promote convergence with EU developments in higher education.
- Promote people-to-people contacts, intercultural awareness and understanding.

These objectives are pursued in the eligible Partner Countries, through actions that:

- Improve the quality of higher education and enhance its relevance for the labour market and society.
- Improve the level of competences and skills in HEIs by developing new and innovative education programs.
- Enhance the management, governance and innovation capacities, as well as the internationalization of HEIs.
- Increase the capacities of national authorities to modernize their higher education systems, by supporting to the definition, implementation and monitoring of reform policies.
- Foster regional integration and cooperation across different regions of the world through joint initiatives, sharing of good practices and cooperation.

### 3.2. Types of activities and strands

Capacity building projects typically focus on one of three main activities: curriculum development activities, modernization of governance and management of HEIs and systems or strengthening of relations between higher education and the wider economic and social environment.

Organizations can choose from three project strands:

- Strand 1: Fostering access to cooperation in higher education, which are designed to cater for newcomers to the program, less involved countries/regions, and for disadvantaged targeted groups (i.e., through modernization of management/administrative capacity, increase of the accessibility of students/staff with fewer opportunities, etc.
- Strand 2: Partnerships for transformation in higher education, which aim to have a large and wider impact on innovation, university/business relations and institutional governance.
- Strand 3: Structural reform projects, which focus on the macro level of policy reforms required to foster internationalization and require the involvement of education authorities and ministries.

### 3.3. Priorities of the program

The main priorities of the action are the following:

#### **Green Deal**

Higher Education systems are crucial for supporting the Green Deal, through developing knowledge, competences, skills and values, and potentially enabling a profound change in people's behavior. In this context, priority will be given to projects that aim to:

- Support the modernization of economies, making them more competitive and innovative, while ensuring a just green transition, stimulating green jobs and paving the way to a climate neutral society with a gender-transformative approach, not exclusively focusing on male-dominated fields.

- Provide applicable answers to environmental challenges, including urban and rural development, green and efficient energy, health, water and waste management, sustainable transport, desertification, biodiversity loss and sustainable use of natural resources, strengthening agri-food value chains at national and regional level.
- Increase climate awareness, sustainability and resilience, in all sectors of society and economy.
- Accelerate the transition towards a just green and circular economy and tackle regional and trans-regional environmental challenges, in particular by strengthening links with the private sector and by enhancing the knowledge and green skills needed for a modern work force.
- Develop competences in various sustainability-relevant sectors, green sectorial skills strategies and methodologies, as well as future-oriented curricula that better meet the needs of individuals.

### **Digital transformation**

Raising the quality and inclusiveness of education through digital technologies, whilst also enabling learners to acquire essential digital competences and sector-specific digital skills is of strategic importance for the EU and many countries of the world. The higher education system is increasingly impacted by the digital transformation, but also has an essential role to harness its benefits and opportunities and tackle digital divides. In this context, priority will be given to projects that aim to:

- Support the development and uptake of digital skills to make the digital transformation as comprehensive and inclusive as possible.
- Help to bridge the digital divide by promoting digital literacy, digital entrepreneurship, gender-sensitive programs and strategies, specifically in remote and rural areas and vulnerable communities.
- Develop connectivity solutions empowering citizens through distance learning and teaching innovations.
- Support the digital economy and reinforce scientific, technical and innovation capacities by fostering links between education, research and business in the area of digitalization, including through projects related to data infrastructure, data management and SME/business digitalization.
- Improving digital education eco-systems, by reinforcing digital skills and competences of teachers and academic staff.

### **Integration of migrants**

Education and training systems play a key role in addressing the challenges of migration as well as unlocking migration's benefits. They help newcomers acquire necessary labor market skills, understand the cultures of the host country and help the native population with being open to diversity and change. In this context, priority will be given to projects that aim to:

- Support recognition of degrees and credentials and contribute to a regional credit transfer system to build regional higher education areas and intra-regional connectivity.
- Granting access to education to migrants and displaced persons in receiving countries, including language education and scholarships.
- Develop holistic models that address the unique needs of refugee students and ensure access to education with a strong support for academic, social, physical and psychological development.

## **Governance, peace, security and human development**

Commitment to the rule of law, human and fundamental rights, equality, democracy and good governance are the bedrock of stable, fair and prosperous societies. This action can help lay the foundations for strengthening active citizenship and building specific expertise in these areas. CBHE projects can help identify long-term solutions to problems of weak governance in higher education. In this context, priority will be given to projects that aim to support academic cooperation and initiatives in the following areas:

- Governance, rule of law, democracy, fundamental values, protection of human rights, and the fight against corruption.
- Fight against discrimination, promote media literacy and the role of an independent media and civil society.
- Peace and security, human development, intercultural dialogue, respect for diversity, tolerance, gender equality, women and youth empowerment.
- Social, economic and cultural rights, health and well-being.

## **Sustainable growth and jobs**

Higher education is needed to build skills for life and work. Higher education also supports employability and is a precondition for sustainable growth. A key objective is to tackle the existing mismatch between education outcomes and labor market demands, including the development of work-based learning. In this context, priority will be given to projects that aim to:

- Foster the offer and uptake of Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths (STEAM) skills—and related gender inclusiveness—with linkages with the just green transition towards climate neutrality.
- Promote youth and women entrepreneurship, develop innovation hubs and start-ups to help generate local employment opportunities and prevent brain drain.
- Strengthen links between the academic sector, research and business to address current and future skills needs, primarily entrepreneurship, and skills needed for value chains development on national, regional level.
- Support the upskilling of the young population.
- Strengthen links with the labor market to promote jobs creation, job opportunities and private sector involvement in skills-development.
- Develop primary and secondary teacher education and in-service trainings to address structural causes of school dropouts and counter persisting economic and gender inequalities.

## **3.4. Aligning CBHE with the EU’s Global Gateway Initiative**

The European Union’s Global Gateway is a strategic framework aimed at boosting global connectivity and implementing EU policy priorities in partner countries through infrastructure development, digital transformation, and fostering sustainable growth. This initiative is pivotal in ensuring that the capacity-building actions within the Erasmus+ program are synergistic with the EU’s overarching external policies.

The Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Higher Education (CBHE) projects are designed not only to enhance educational standards but also to contribute significantly to the Global Gateway's goals. By modernizing higher education systems and fostering international collaboration, these projects help build robust educational infrastructures that are aligned with the EU's objectives for global development.

Specifically, the Global Gateway is reflected in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide under the award criteria for CBHE. These guidelines ensure that funded projects are coherent with the priorities set out by the Global Gateway, emphasizing the importance of educational reforms that support sustainable and inclusive growth, digital and green transitions, and connectivity improvements at the country level.

- By incorporating the principles of the Global Gateway, CBHE projects aim to:
- Enhance the quality and relevance of higher education to meet global and local labor market needs.
- Foster innovation and governance improvements in higher education institutions.
- Promote equitable access to education, addressing social and economic disparities.
- Support sustainable development goals through education that emphasizes green and digital skills.

Integrating the Global Gateway's strategic priorities into the CBHE framework not only strengthens the impact of these educational initiatives but also ensures that they contribute to broader EU objectives, fostering a cohesive and sustainable approach to global educational development.

## 4. Enhancing higher education systems: key focus areas of EU capacity building projects

The European Union's capacity building actions in higher education have consistently emphasized a holistic approach to improving higher education systems in partner countries. These initiatives aim not only to elevate the academic standards but also to ensure that higher education institutions contribute effectively to their societies and economies. Below is an expanded discussion of the key focus areas.

### Curriculum development and modernization

Efforts in this area aim to align higher education curricula with global standards and local needs, ensuring that programs are both relevant and forward-looking. This involves integrating new scientific and technological advancements, enhancing the interdisciplinarity of programs, and incorporating skills that are critical in the modern workforce such as critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy. One interesting example in this area was the HiCure project (Development of Health Informatics integrated curricula in Computing and Health-oriented undergraduate degrees / 561776-EPP-1-2015-1-PS-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP). In the framework of the project, the four HiCure Jordanian and Palestinian partner universities successfully established 12 competence-based undergraduate courses integrating 60 detailed case studies. During the life of the project, the developed HiCure courses were taught 67 times in all the partner universities and the total number of students who benefited from them is quite remarkable (1603 students). Alignment with the Bologna principles is visible in the use of ECTS for each of the established courses.

### Quality assurance and accreditation

Quality assurance and accreditation processes are vital to maintaining high educational standards and fostering trust in higher education qualifications both domestically and internationally. EU programs

support the development of robust quality assurance systems that include both internal and external review mechanisms, adherence to international standards, and continuous improvement practices in teaching and learning. The HICA project (Harmonization and Innovation in Central American Higher Education Curricula: Enhancing and Implementing the Regional Quality Framework / 561531-EPP-1-2015-1-ES-EPPKA2-CBHE-SP) could be included in this area. As part of the project, Central American universities networked and reinforced their regional cooperation capacity. Moreover, associations and the Ministries of Education will benefit from a regionally agreed tool that they can use for quality assurance and teaching reforms for their own systems as well as for the recognition of studies abroad.

### **Governance and management**

Improving governance and management in higher education institutions is another critical area. This includes enhancing the capabilities of leadership through training and policy development, improving financial management, and ensuring that institutions are responsive to changes in the educational and social context. A good example in this area was the TACTIC project (Through Academic Cooperation Towards Innovative Capacity / 561653-EPP-1-2015-1-CZ-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP). The project contributed to the modernization and reform of the management system within HEIs and to strengthen the competencies of top and middle managers of universities in Cambodia, Mongolia and Vietnam, so that the universities can face the new challenges brought by globalization and the knowledge society. Staff Advisory Offices (SAOs) have been established at all partner universities as centers of a modern approach in solving managerial problems.

### **Higher education and society**

EU initiatives often focus on how higher education can serve society more broadly, addressing the development of graduate employability skills, teacher training, and creating effective linkages with industry and community. This focus area aims to enhance the contributions of higher education to social and economic development through community service, lifelong learning, and active engagement with local and global challenges. A relevant example in this category was the EDULIVE project (Transforming higher education to strengthen links between universities and the livestock sector in Argentina and Peru / 561541-EPP-1-2015-1-AT-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP). The aim of EDULIVE was to strengthen the cooperation between Latin American universities and all relevant livestock sector stakeholders to ensure they offer demand-driven higher education programs and to increase their capacity in responding to the innovation needs of this sector. The project made significant efforts to involve stakeholders in the project activities, in particular with companies working in the field of Animal Science. This collaboration has been reinforced thanks to the organization of a series of workshops with private companies, farmers' associations, research organizations and NGOs in order to discuss and develop possible cooperation mechanisms in teaching, research and extension services.

### **Digitalization and innovative educational technologies**

Recognizing the transformative impact of digital technologies on education, EU-funded programs encourage the adoption of innovative educational technologies. This includes the use of learning management systems, online learning platforms, and digital tools that enhance teaching and student engagement, as well as preparing students for a digitalized world. The ACADEMICA project (Accessibility and Harmonisation of Higher Education in Central Asia through Curriculum Modernization and Development / 561553-EPP-1-2015-1-BG-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP) could be included in this area. This project modernized university curricula in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, by integrating ICT based methods and



contents. Innovative e-learning courses were developed for HEI staff to equip them with the necessary transversal competences. The courses are available in a virtual learning environment, where users also exchange information, experiences and educational resources.

### **Sustainable development and climate change**

Given the global challenges of sustainability and climate change, EU programs are increasingly prioritizing education that supports sustainable development. This includes integrating sustainability into curricula, promoting research on sustainable technologies and practices, and preparing students to contribute to a sustainable future. An interesting example in this area was the UNICAM project (Implementing quality of education & training of the young Universities in rural area of Cambodia / 562006-EPP-1-2015-1-ES-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP). A comprehensive Master Curriculum in Sustainable Agriculture (MSA) has been successfully accredited and launched at three universities in rural areas in Cambodia. Overall, the project improved the academic capacities of the Cambodian universities in terms of designing curricula according to new standards, training of lecturers and new generations of master students. In a more extensive way, the project successfully promoted international cooperation in the field of sustainable agriculture.

### **Inclusion, equity, and access in higher education**

Promoting social inclusion, equity, and access to higher education for all students, including disadvantaged and marginalized groups, is a cornerstone of EU capacity building efforts. Programs focus on removing barriers to access and participation in higher education through scholarships, support services, inclusive policies, and outreach programs aimed at increasing diversity within higher education institutions. The MUSE project (Disability and modernity: Ensuring quality education of disabled students / 561745-EPP-1-2015-1-CL-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP) fully fits in this category. The MUSE International Network supported regional cooperation, and is still active in the international, Inter-Latin-American framework on disability issues. The network promotes and supports all kinds of initiatives aimed at establishing public policy for the inclusion of students with disabilities in HEIs, and at promoting employment. The fact that institutions from other countries can join the network and broaden the exchange of good practices added value to this cooperation. In particular, the role of Chile (the coordinating institution is from Chile) in the development of the region is essential, because its economic and political stability could contribute to development in other neighboring countries.

## **5. Structural impact of the Erasmus+ CBHE projects. The SPHERE report**

The European Commission and the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) commissioned the SPHERE consortium, composed of the University of Barcelona and the European University Association, to conduct an assessment. This evaluation focused on the impact of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) initiative, specifically examining Structural Projects, on the higher education systems within Central Asia, the Eastern Partnership, Russia, the Southern Mediterranean, and the Western Balkans. The request for this study coincided with the conclusion of the Erasmus+ programming period from 2014 to 2020, as preparations were being made to develop future actions for the 2021-2027 period.

The report evaluated the influence of these projects during the 2014-2020 programming period, with an eye towards shaping future actions for 2021-2027. The focus was particularly on Structural Projects aimed at reforming higher education systems at national or regional levels in various regions including Central Asia, Eastern Partnership countries, Russia, the Southern Mediterranean, and the Western Balkans.

The report reveals that these projects have led to tangible impacts in several key areas:

1. **Legislative Reforms:** There have been notable reforms or amendments to national legislation concerning higher education.
2. **Quality Assurance Systems:** Significant advancements have been made in developing quality assurance systems.
3. **Bologna Process Alignment:** There has been greater alignment with the Bologna Process which enhances compatibility and comparability of higher education systems across Europe.

In addition to these direct benefits, there were structural changes at institutional levels such as the introduction of new structures, strategies, and policies that are in line with broader educational reforms. Moreover, many of these impacts were scaled up through dissemination to other national or regional bodies or by inspiring related projects and ventures.

The intangible impacts, though harder to measure, included enhanced staff development and human resource pools, increased research capacity, advancements in internationalization, and attitudinal shifts that underpin these developments. However, the report points out challenges in measuring these impacts accurately, as many ministries lacked the tools to do so, and often impacts were not easily attributable to single projects due to the influence of various overlapping national and international initiatives.

One significant finding is the cumulative effect of multiple EU projects over time. For example, prior Tempus program projects often laid the groundwork for later Erasmus+ initiatives, facilitating gradual systemic change. This historical perspective highlights how successive projects contribute to a broader evolution in higher education systems.

The report also emphasized the importance of conducting ex-post impact assessments to gain a clearer understanding of the long-term effects of these projects on the policy landscape and institutional practices. Additionally, it suggests that more flexibility in project design could enhance the effectiveness of future initiatives, recommending a reduction in administrative burdens and a more inclusive approach to stakeholder engagement in project planning and implementation.

Overall, the report underscored the substantial contributions of Erasmus+ CBHE projects to the development of higher education systems in partner countries, advocating for improvements in project assessment and implementation to amplify their structural impact further.

## 6. Conclusions

In the European Union's concerted efforts to enhance higher education systems globally through the Erasmus+ Capacity Building for Higher Education (CBHE) program, a significant evolution has been observed. The program, integral in fostering the development of higher education across various regions including Central Asia, the Eastern Partnership, the Southern Mediterranean, and the Western Balkans, emphasizes modernization and internationalization.

The Erasmus+ CBHE program has been pivotal in transforming education systems by aligning them with contemporary global standards and integrating them more deeply into the European educational framework. Through its focus on various strategic areas such as legislative reform, quality assurance, and governance enhancement, the program has facilitated substantial educational reforms. This is evidenced by improved legislation related to higher education, enhanced quality assurance systems, and increased adherence to the Bologna Process, which aims to harmonize European higher education.

Furthermore, the program's impact extends beyond infrastructural and policy modifications. It fosters a broader educational cooperation between EU and non-EU countries, promoting intercultural exchange and understanding which are vital in today's globalized world. This is achieved through structured partnerships involving both academic and non-academic institutions, which work collaboratively on projects that not only modernize educational systems but also address key challenges such as equity of access, relevance to the labor market, and institutional governance.

As Erasmus+ plans for future programming periods, it continues to prioritize flexibility and inclusiveness in project design to effectively respond to evolving educational needs. The program's commitment to enhancing educational quality and relevance across the globe underscores its role as a cornerstone in international educational development, advocating for a holistic approach that incorporates green initiatives, digital transformation, and inclusivity.

Overall, the Erasmus+ CBHE program demonstrates the EU's strategic commitment to leveraging education as a tool for social and economic development, preparing global citizens to tackle the challenges of the modern world through enhanced cooperation, modernized systems, and shared knowledge and values. This ongoing effort is crucial for sustaining the impact of higher education reforms and for ensuring that these systems continue to contribute positively to global development.

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