

LEO-NET

Your network to facilitate employability and sustainable careers

LEO-NET POSITION PAPER

ON ERASMUS+ AND FUTURE PROGRAMMES OF THE EU COMMISSION

OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE (YOUTH) EMPLOYABILITY AND SUSTAINABLE CAREERS

Eindhoven, October 2017

INTRODUCTION

LEO-NET was initiated and founded in 1999. Ever since it has met the need for a targeted network that can assure the exchange of information concerning traineeships.

The network connects institutions of higher education and related organizations from 17 different European countries. LEO-NET has more than 100 dynamic members. Some of them are organized in a consortium structure, others are individual higher education institutions or related organizations. The members of LEO-NET are driven to prepare and empower higher education students and graduates for successful long-term careers. LEO-NET aims to facilitate its members' aspirations to increase employability and sustainable careers as an answer to youth unemployment, changing demands of the global labour market and reorientation needs of the employee.

All year round, LEO-NET keeps track of latest trends and developments on the one hand and on members' ideas and aspirations on the other hand, to inform and inspire both members and relevant organizations. For over 10 years a yearly contact seminar has been organized in early spring, the Barcelona LEO-NET seminar.

All members of LEO-Net are active and experienced within the Erasmus+ programme. As a network, we like to inform you about the ideas living among our members about measures to enhance employability and how Erasmus+ and future EU-programmes could contribute to this ambitious goal.

This concept paper is the result of close consultation and intense discussions with the members at several occasions, among which also the LEO-NET Barcelona seminar of April 2017.

We wish you an inspirational reading experience and we trust the recommendations can contribute to future fruitful discussions.

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The **aim** of the position paper is to share the LEO-NET members' vision on the Erasmus+ programme, to share their concerns and to contribute to future traineeship mobility programmes.

The paper focuses on the following topics intertwined with (graduate) traineeship mobility in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme:

Consistent development of the **added value of consortia** will positively affect the quality of traineeships. Rethinking the **efficient use of resources** and the adaptation of the financial flows and grant administration will allow to spend more time and attention to quality enhancement too. The latter can also be enforced by structural **cooperation** initiatives among consortia and between consortia and HEIs, as it will encourage peer learning and the sharing of good practices and expertise.

The impact of the current **financial support for trainees** can be enhanced by a levelling of the grants in certain situations; at all times bearing in mind that the financially more vulnerable groups should not be affected. The **protection of the trainee** while carrying out their tasks during the traineeship, is another concern. Last but not least the **extension of the target group** is considered an asset in the struggle against youth unemployment.

A number of opportunities for **quality improvement** and a more efficient and effective use of resources are proposed to future programmes with a view to sustainable careers of young graduates. The suggestions aim at better responding to the goals of the Erasmus+ programme and the future successor programme in particular, and at better meeting the broader challenges that the European Commission is facing, such as Youth Unemployment, Youth Guarantee and Inclusion.

Structure of the text

Each one of the five topics is systematically dealt with as follows:

At first the '*current situation*' is reflected, i.e. the challenges in today's situation.

Secondly, the '*preferred situation*' is described, i.e. the situation that would serve the purpose better, as agreed upon by all parties consulted.

Finally, under '*recommendations to bridge the gap*', solutions are put forward that could solve some of the challenges and foster the opportunities.

By discussing possible solutions with different relevant parties, we think the recommendations all take into account their feasibility, but of course all concerned parties would need to agree on the added value.

We are open to constructively discuss the proposed recommendations in a brainstorm and further elaborate the recommendations in possible actions if valuable for future developments.

We are looking forward to your feedback and will be happy to share it with the members of the LEO-NET and the participants to our activities.

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1. THE ADDED VALUE OF CONSORTIA

For many years the EC has promoted the establishment of regional consortia for traineeship mobility and many successful consortia have been formed. Consortia for traineeship mobility play a key role as a regional point of contact for different target groups: students, graduates, HEIs, host organizations/companies, decision makers. Moreover, consortia have considerable potential for creating added value: quality assurance of traineeships for both trainees and host organization, quality services in an efficient and cost-effective manner, knowledge centers for international traineeship expertise¹.

Current situation

- Nowadays consortia mainly serve as a kind of transfer office for grants; neither time nor resources are available for consortia to fulfil other tasks that are considered equally important.
- Many young graduates still have no access to European funding for post-graduate traineeships. This is particularly the case
 - when the home institution (HOI) opts to use the financial resources mainly for study exchanges or traineeship exchanges during studies, disregarding the need for traineeships for young graduates
 - when the home institution did not give a mandate to a consortium to act on behalf of their young graduates
 - when there is no traineeship mobility consortium in the graduates' region or country, to turn to.
- Some consortia OS resources are used to cover staff expenses and/or to generate extra grants. Consequently, OS resources are often not used to improve the quality assurance of the traineeship experience, or to invest in broader and consequent dissemination, or the development of new activities.

Preferred situation

- In each region / European country there is minimum 1 consortium, to guarantee the necessary services for young graduates, to unlock traineeship mobility for all young graduates and to enhance their participation in the E+ programme.
- Adapted roles for consortia with a view to guaranteed quality assurance:
 - to promote and support active networking between HEIs and companies
 - to unlock more traineeship opportunities for young graduates
 - to raise the quality of the traineeship experience for all parties involved
 - optimization of the impact of the traineeship experience.
- Consortia as recognized centers of expertise, first-line points of contact for traineeship mobility for the different stakeholders (trainees, companies, HEIs,). The regional consortium as the one-stop-shop for

¹ In some regions there are active consortia whereas in other regions, by default universities or HEIs take up this role. The suggestions are not meant to undermine the good work that is being done by various stakeholders.

- Companies:
 - to find information about traineeships and necessary administration
 - to post traineeship offers in one traineeship portal, for different educational levels (as companies may need different educational profiles at the same time)
 - to ask for the (pre)selection of applicants by consortia, according to the company's needs
 - to be able to count on swift communication and quick availability of participants.
- Students:
 - to find accessible information about traineeships, grant application and traineeship administration
 - to find guidance and support for traineeship search, feedback on CV-writing, intercultural preparation & knowing about intercultural challenges in the workplace.
- Regional, national and international policy makers:
 - data collection by consortia, made easily accessible for analysis; to substantiate decisions
 - dialogue with regional consortia can be of added value for companies, governing bodies and policy makers on various levels.

Recommendations to bridge the gap

- More adequate monitoring of the certification in order to obtain recognition by regional and international partners of the added value of consortia
- Manuals and guidance from Europe for new consortia as well as for consortia in general (taking into account their new role. Pointing out the measures for quality improvement that could be taken by consortia by dissemination of good practices and/or theoretical examples (e.g. publication, sessions, webinar)
- Reduction of the actual administrative burden – preferably by centralizing the payments of the E+ grants on a centralized European level (see also below under 2. Efficient use of resources: grant administration, p.7).
- Reform of the OS resources (see also part 2. Efficient use of resources: OS, p.6)
More targeted European funding will result in more consortia; these consortia can be encouraged to undertake measures for quality improvement.

2. EFFICIENT USE OF RESOURCES

With a view to enhancing the quality of traineeship mobility, the use of the resources is to be reconsidered.

ORGANISATION SUPPORT (OS)

Current situation

- Consortia can often not avoid to use OS resources to cover the costs for administrative staff or to generate extra mobility grants (see also part 2. Efficient use of resources: Grant Administration, p.7)

Preferred situation

- Primarily the OS resources are to be used for quality enhancement
- OS resources encourage consortia and institutions to take action towards quality improvement.

Recommendations to bridge the gap

- Definition of appropriate use of OS and encouraging measures for the accurate use of OS – good practices
- Reduction of the basic OS budget on the one hand, but extra financing on the other hand for targeted, quality enhancing measures with measurable impact.

Examples of quality enhancing measures:

- activities for constructive dialogue with target groups (companies, students, institutions, third parties).
- introduction of an E+ label for companies. Consortia get a mandate to award a quality label to the host organization / companies that meet the predefined quality standards; after formal positive assessment of the traineeship experience by the trainee. The consortia keep track of the quality of host companies.
- guidance activities for incoming and outgoing trainees & monitoring during the traineeship experience.

GRANT ADMINISTRATION

Current situation

- The grant administration and payment of grants turns out to be a time-consuming task for consortia and HEIs. This is to the disadvantage of the creation of added value.
- Reallocation of grants is admitted but limited to an institutional level. National reallocation is too often depending on the attitude of individual institutions; whether they mainly see the interest of their own institution (students/graduates) or are they able to see the bigger picture, namely the interest of all involved institutions in Europe.
- Some young graduates are deprived from EU support for traineeship, as their home institution is not involved in the E+ programme, nor is there a regional consortium where they can turn to in order to apply for an E+ grant.

Preferred situation

- The mobility resources are accessible for all graduated students. The mobility budget and grant payment for young graduates* is allocated to one centralized office, on the European level (*Remark: the management of traineeship mobility budget for students remains at the HEI level, as it is subject to the institution's own strategy and priorities. Unspent budget by institutions that cannot be reallocated anymore will have consequences for subsequent budget allocations. This is proposed in order to strive for a maximal use of European resources).
- The central office for grant payment administers the grant payment in an efficient and transparent way.
- The central office maximizes the efficient use of resources, with flexible possibilities for grant re-allocation in case of budget surplus, nationally and internationally.

Recommendations to bridge the gap

- Simplification and facilitation of the procedure for transferring and the payment of grants, to make grants available in a more efficient way.
Preferably, this is done by establishing a specific EU agency for the payment of grants.
Advantages:
 - no double funding possible
 - institutions and consortia can focus on content, quality and network-possibility to invest in.
 - one European software system that is systematically being updated in accordance to the grant amounts and the European grant regulation.
- In case a EU-financing body would not be feasible, the following actions could answer the need for efficient financing:
 - creation of the possibility for transferring grants between certified consortia
 - creation of the possibility of taking grants for incoming trainees in case of sufficient mobility budget and if there is no consortium in the (educational) home country to pick up this role.

GRANT ADMINISTRATION / MOBILITY TOOL

The EC imposes the use of the mobility tool to report on the mobility. There are opportunities to reduce the total management cost and work load for grant administration and the reporting of the mobility.

Current situation:

- For the management of the grant administration, however, the same data are registered (double work): once in the mobility tool, once in the system of the HEI or consortium.
- The more mobility is realized, the more work load pressure for making use of a specific IT-tool – and have it adapted to the Erasmus+ programme - to reduce the workload of the grant administration.
- Smaller consortia or HEI's / other institutions having lower numbers of mobility may not be able to afford expensive IT-tools for a smooth processing of the grant administration. This increases the work load in case of smaller numbers of traineeships proportionally much more than when using IT-tools dealing with larger numbers of traineeships.
- The organizations that invest in an IT-tools, all individually have to pay the contractor, to negotiate SLA's, have to pay for the hosting of the data. Furthermore the transfer of data doesn't always run smoothly. A small change in the Mobility Tool can cause serious transfer problems.

Preferred situation:

- The EC puts standard an efficient IT-tool at the disposal of the mobility budget applicants, to support the management of the mobility and grant administration from a to z. (1 system, contract negotiated of EU-level, 1 SLA). The software includes automatized possibilities for monitoring the traineeship.

Recommendations to bridge the gap:

- Either extending the existing mobility tool by a standard EU-module (1 software package, 1 contractor, 1 SLA to be negotiated for all users). This software does not need to be developed from scratch as there are already some in use (adapted to the Erasmus mobility scheme).

FOSTER COOPERATION

Current situation

- Some consortia do have very valuable experience and expertise, whereas others do not, by lack of resources for staff or staff development
- Existing initiatives for peer learning are well-received and turn out to be highly effective e.g. LEO-NET European Consortium Day, LEO-NET Barcelona Seminar, NA, information seminars/workshops, project writing days, handbooks and workshops for writing project applications and (intermediate) reports.

Preferred situation

- Structural cooperation and peer learning are used to improve quality and efficiency in administering traineeship mobility; organization of fruitful dialogues and discussions with peers and other parties (companies, students, governing bodies) and assuring (dissemination of) activities for (youth)employability and sustainable careers.

Recommendations to bridge the gap

- Extra budget allocated and action line provided for cooperation initiatives between consortia or between consortia and HEIs. This initiative should meet pre-defined criteria, with e.g. clearly defined content, impact, number of participants.
- For the support of this short term cooperation, initiatives for which can be applied for (at NA or 'EU grant body') in a flexible way; no heavily charged long term projects but rather concrete initiatives responding quickly and flexibly, to seize opportunities to reach targeted goals.
- Publication and dissemination of good practices
- Issue of EU-label for consortia.

3. GRANTS / FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR TRAINEES

The traineeship mobility grant aims at encouraging (graduated) students to consider an international traineeship. The following adjustments to the awarding procedures for the grants would be welcomed by institutions and consortia to facilitate more applicants:

GRANT AMOUNTS PER REGION

Current situation

- Traineeships get different grants, depending on an average cost of living of the host country (3 grant categories). However, living expenses within the same country may be very divergent (e.g. living & accommodation costs in cities such as Paris, Munich, Amsterdam are considerably higher than in small towns in the same country). The division in 3 country categories is not in accordance with the real costs. This affects especially trainees with financially weaker backgrounds.

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- The grant amount is low: financially more vulnerable groups are disadvantaged as company allowances are not guaranteed (see also 3. Grants / financial support for trainees - Allowance / financial support from companies, p.11).
- Part of the trainees get an allowance from the host company (some get a small amount, some get an allowance that is quite high, but often trainees get no allowance at all). When calculating the grants, the allowance by a host company is seldom taken into account. This results in different financial boosts for similar situations.

Preferred situation

- Grants differentiated on country and city level, in accordance to the real average cost of living in the area of the host company
- Taking the remuneration allowance by the host company into account when calculating the grants.

Recommendations to bridge the gap

- When the allowance of the host company is taken into account, budget will become available for additional grants or top-ups.

Some institutions already do take the remuneration of the host companies into account. Their best practice could be used to instruct other consortia and HEIs. More efficient would be the establishment of one specific European agency for grant payment, equipped with the necessary differentiating financial tools (see 2. Efficient use of resources: Grant administration, p.7).

ZERO GRANT

Current situation

- In case there is no mobility budget available, (in some countries) students can get the statute of E+ trainee, which facilitates the students' mobility as it offers a structural framework for the traineeship. However, in case of surplus mobility budget (e.g. in case of shortened traineeships or cancelled traineeships) this category cannot be awarded a grant in retrospect to their start.

Preferred situation

- Zero-grant statute with possibility for a consortium or HEI to allocate grants retroactively for grants for traineeships that have already started, or have been carried out.

Recommendations to bridge the gap

Preferably: central management for grant payment (1 European agency); (see 2. Efficient use of resources: Grant administration, p.7).

- or in case of continued decentralized financial administration, creation of the possibility to reopen grant applications in case of budget surplus, for economical retroactive grant allocation by consortia or HEI.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRAINEESHIP GRANTS DURING & AFTER STUDY

Current situation

- Grant amounts for traineeships during and after the study are the same.

The fact that there is no difference in grant amounts between student trainees and graduated trainees, does not encourage graduating students enough to engage in a traineeship, as they are not students but fully qualified when starting the internship.

This also affects the financially more vulnerable graduates who are often urged to enter into the labour market right away for financial reasons, instead of gaining extra professional competences which will lead them towards more sustainable careers. This affects in particular the weaker financial profiles from study programmes with uncertain labour market perspectives, who experience difficulties in accessing the job market.

Preferred situation

- The graduated trainees' added value is recognized by a higher grant.

Recommendations to bridge the gap

- Create financial budget space by taking company allowances into account for grant calculation (see below: Grants / financial support for the trainees: Allowances / financial support from companies p. 11).

ALLOWANCES / FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM COMPANIES

Current situation

- Some trainees get an allowance from the company on top of their grant, whereas other trainees do not receive extra funding to cover the cost of their stay abroad (the grant covering only part of the expenses). In some EU-countries traineeship allowance is mandatory for trainees, in other countries there is no legal obligation to give a remuneration to trainees. In some cases, even regulations aiming to protect trainees are lacking.

Preferred situation

- Efficient use of financial means; grants can be adapted to the financial needs of the trainee to eliminate financial differences (and thus making traineeships also more affordable for financially weaker groups).
- The companies get guidance / directives about the average allowance that trainees may expect in their sector or region.

Recommendations to bridge the gap

- Use the experience and data of the current funding programmes to throw a light on the average allowance given by companies in the different sectors. Include communication about this aspect in the new role of consortia.
- Declaration of honour from the trainee and the host company about the amount of the allowance from the company or host organization, in combination with an EU directive for the adaptation of grant amounts in relation to the level of the allowance the trainee gets.
- European management of the grants (by 1 specific agency) with more differentiated grant calculation.

4. PROTECTION OF THE TRAINEE

The safety and protection of the trainees are important concerns and deserve the attention of all parties.

In many EU countries there are regulations concerning traineeships with a view to protecting trainees from certain physical or mental risks and/or abuse.

These regulations may cover aspects such as risk analysis, (accident) insurance, reimbursement of expenses or – in some countries- even payment of the trainee, maximum numbers of work hours, etc.

Moreover graduate trainees are not equally on board as local regulations often only regard students.

Graduates, however, are not enrolled and are therefore likely to fall between two chairs as higher institutions and companies disclaim responsibility. To better protect the trainee it is appropriate to pay attention to the following topics in the future programmes.

ACCIDENT INSURANCE

Current situation

- The local regulations for insurance for traineeships (e.g. accident insurance) are divergent: in some countries the sending institutions are obliged to insure trainees, in others the companies are responsible for accident insurance, or it is the trainees who have to take out their own insurance.
- Traineeship regulations in the home country of the trainee and the ones companies are subject to in the host country may even not be in line. For companies intending to engage trainees from different EU countries it is often unclear what kind of (administrative) obligations they must fulfil.
- Trainees may be forced to take out paid insurance because local regulations do not oblige host companies to take out accident insurance or even may avoid to meet the local legal obligations. Follow up of this is difficult for sending institutions as they often have no insight into the host company's local legal regulations.
- Trainees may even be employed uninsured for accidents in the workplace
- Sending institutions in some countries are obliged to insure trainees.

Preferred situation

- Trainees are equally protected whatever country they come from or whatever EU country they are doing a traineeship in. Transparent and effective EU directives and procedures for adequate (accident) insurance for activities in the framework of each traineeship, to be sure all trainees are insured.

Recommendations to bridge the gap

- Create an overview at EU level of the regional traineeship regulations concerning accident insurance. It should be clear for trainees as well as companies which requirements they are expected to meet.

In some EU countries the traineeship regulations comprise strict indications concerning mandatory risk analyses for traineeships; in case the trainee will be exposed to certain risks during the traineeship (e.g. while working with chemicals, or being exposed to medical risks in hospitals, or carrying out other tasks). To make sure the trainee is not needlessly exposed to risks, work post sheets may legally be obliged to gain insight into which measures have been taken to protect the trainee.

Current situation

- Local regulations for traineeships concerning risk analysis are divergent; companies are subject to different local regulations. Traineeship regulations in the home country of the trainee and the ones companies are subject to in their country, may even not be in line.
- Follow up is difficult for sending institutions as they often have no insight into the host company's local legal regulations.

Preferred situation

- Trainees are equally protected whatever country they come from or whatever EU-country they are doing a traineeship in.

Recommendations to bridge the gap

- Create an overview at EU level of the regional traineeship regulations concerning risk analysis and work post sheets where risks are at stake. It should be clear for trainees as well as companies which requirements they are expected to meet.
- European directives for companies and trainees concerning risk analysis (and work post sheets).

5. TARGET GROUP EXTENSION

Last but not least, in the struggle against youth unemployment, extension of the target group (trainees) is to be considered. The extension relates to the registration period, reorientation and inclusion in the labour market.

Current situation

- Limiting the support for traineeship to students or to young graduates having registered during the graduation year, deprives two target groups of the possibility of gaining international experience. These two target groups mentioned below would benefit substantially from gaining extra professional experience and intercultural skills:
 - unemployed alumni who did not register for an E+ grant in the course of the graduation year (e.g. because they were initially optimistic about their labour market chances, but are still unemployed after months of job hunting)
 - graduates with a first employment experience who realize they need the opportunity to gain extra skills, in order to better meet the requirements of the labour market, or who decide to re-orient their career, better in line with their personal strengths.

Preferred situation

- (Recent) graduates and young employees are being equipped with the necessary skills to enhance their employment and social participation.
- Foster human capital; keep learning opportunities open from the start of careers (up to 5 years from graduation) to develop and encourage an inclination towards seizing opportunities for additional training or reorienting, to assure sustainable careers.

Recommendations to bridge the gap

- Adaptation of the existing time frames for registration and actual traineeship:
 - Registration: no mandatory registration during the graduation year
 - Traineeship timeframe:
 - for young graduates without job experience: maximum term to start a traineeship is 12 months after graduation
 - for young graduates with job experience: maximum term to start a traineeship is 5 years after graduation.

PARTICIPANT REPORT / DATA COLLECTION

The EC mobility tool comprises a mandatory post-mobility questionnaire. Feedback from the (graduate) trainees at the end of shortly after the mobility period is indeed important and very valuable. The collected data can be used to map specific needs and for further development of the programme.

Current situation

- The questionnaire seems to have been developed mainly for student mobility (e.g. questions concerning study catalogue etc.). As a consequence, a number of questions are irrelevant for trainees, or are interpreted wrongly by the (graduate) trainees (e.g. about the recognition or credits for the traineeship (4.8-4.14 & 4.11)). Obtaining credits nor academic recognition are possible in the case of graduate trainees, but the questions in itself seem to suggest the opposite. This is quite confusing for graduates; while not really understanding some of the questions, wrong answers may be given. This in turn could lead to wrong conclusions in the data analysis. Moreover, not understanding some of the questions generates in some cases extra email traffic by trainees to the sending institution and vice versa, which causes extra work load.
- One particular question suggests that sending or receiving organisations should give trainees assistance in visa issues (8.4). The latter are indeed relevant questions in the case of the (rather small numbers) of non EU-subjects applying for an Erasmus+ traineeship grant (or maybe in the future if non-EU country destinations may be included in the traineeship mobility programme). Though giving assistance in visa issues by HEI's, consortia and companies can only be optional as embassies and consulates are much better placed to inform about the (sometimes rather complex) visa issues for incoming trainees. The question though can be misunderstood; the graduate may conclude he missed out something and this may lead to strange scores for a non-existing service. Misinterpretation may again lead to wrong conclusions in the data analysis.
- Questions that are irrelevant for either one of the target groups (exchange students, trainees and graduate trainees) make the questionnaire unnecessarily long and undermine quickly the motivation to fill them out accurately.

- HEI's and consortia have access to participant reports of 'their' trainees but lack an insight in the overall processed data on a regional, national and EU-level (e.g. about the channels by which find the traineeship offers). Consortia and HEI's are in need for the data to gain insight into the trainee's experiences and points of view, not only in their own region or country but also elsewhere in the EU, to adapt their strategies to enhance international traineeship mobility.

Preferred situation

- Exchange students, trainees and graduated trainees fill out a specific questionnaire, drawn up for the specific target group taking into account their specific situation. All questions are relevant and clear, even after a quick reading. Separate, adapted questionnaires, lead to accurate final reports and relevant output. The questionnaires unlock relevant and useful data for each target group and don't create extra work load
- The EC puts the data results at the disposal of the consortia and HEI's to underpin their operational and strategic goals. The collected data results are made easily accessible.

Recommendations to bridge the gap

- The current questionnaire is reviewed and preferably unfolded in three separate questionnaires:
 - Questions that could be subject to misinterpretation are adapted and irrelevant questions are left out.
 - Questions that are not yet included but that may deliver important data – for the EC but also for consortia, HEI or other stakeholders- are incorporated in the post-mobility survey.
- The HEI's and consortia are yearly informed about the data results on a regional and country level.

We do hope the recommendations mentioned above will contribute to the creation of an even more effective and efficient future traineeship mobility programme. We are looking forward to further discussions and are open to working closely together.