

**Action required – for information**

**«CLOSING IN ON ERASMUS+» UTRECHT NETWORK STAFF TRAINING SEMINAR HELD IN BERGEN  
OCTOBER 21-23. SOME FINAL REMARKS AND OBSERVATIONS**

**WHY OFFERING THE SEMINAR:**

The Erasmus+ brought some new challenges to the administrators of the programme. The new formats of the Interinstitutional agreement and the Learning agreement are more extensive than before. There are new tools for reporting and administering the programme (Mobility Tool) and a renewed focus on the importance of Language competence including the online assessment tool, Online Language Support (language test and course). All in all it is perceived by many as more bureaucratization of the programme. This means there is a need for good administrative routines and possibly also a need for simplification of the two principal working documents, the interinstitutional agreement and the Learning Agreement

**PLANNING:**

The seminar was organized and planned by the TF staff mobility. The TF met once in Vilnius in 2014 and discussed the scope and possible programme of the seminar together with other TF business.

The rest of the planning was made through skype meetings (2) and by e-mail.

By the time of the UN AGM in Tartu the programme was more or less settled. On the AGM Fransisco Gerotti asked the TF if the seminar could have as a result a recommendation on the use of the LA to be sent to the European Commission. The task force said they would try to do so. In the minutes of the AGM this was taken down in the following way:

‘It was noted that during 2014/15 the Network had been invited to take part in several consultations by the European Commission. This was seen as a positive step and ways of developing the relationship were to be encouraged. The latest consultation related to Erasmus+ documents. It was agreed that a copy of the letter should also be sent to the relevant officer within the Commission for KA2 Strategic Partnerships.

It was agreed that the next step would be the further analysis of Key Action 1 during the Bergen Staff Training which would be sent to the EC on behalf of the Network.’

Later on the TF for student mobility was invited to participate in the event. They accepted the invitation and took particular responsibility for the Learning Agreement part of the programme.

**ANNOUNCEMENT AND INVITATION:**

The event was announced to the UN members on the AGM in Tartu. There was a short discussion and some suggestions were given related to the content of the programme.

The event was again announced on 25<sup>th</sup> of June by the UN-google email list with an invitation to register. This was later than planned (beginning of June). The deadline for registration was given to August 20<sup>th</sup>. This was later prolonged until August 31.

#### **PARTICIPATION:**

In the event participated Kristin Skogedal and Helge Bjørlo as hosts/organizers from University of Bergen. Ulle Tensing (Tartu) participated also for the TF staff mobility and Marleen van der Ven (Utrecht) and Maarit Haukka (Helsinki) from the TF Student Mobility and co-organizers. In addition to this the following UN universities sent participants; Tartu, Utrecht, Ljubljana, Malta, Graz, Lund, Masaryk, Tessaloniki; Vilnius, Bologna; Bochum. All in all 19 people from 13 UN members. This was quite less than expected, and only a little more than one third of the UN members participated. There were two or three late cancellations. The majority of the participants were administrators at central level.

7 of the participants in the event were either Heads of IRO, Erasmus Institutional Coordinators, or Heads of mobility teams. The rest of the participants would all work with erasmus student mobility in some way or another. There were 17 women and 2 men.

#### **THE PROGRAMME:**

Initially the programme had four parts, all related to the Erasmus+ programme. At one time it was decided that the programme was too extensive for a two-day seminar and the part "Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility" was removed from the programme. This left the programmes with three different thematic parts which was given more or less equal time in the programme:

The interinstitutional agreement, the Language perspective in student mobility and the Learning agreement.

#### **THE QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE LEARNING AGREEMENT:**

Before the seminar a Questionnaire was sent to the participants by the TF Staff Mobility.

The questionnaire was made up by a few open and general questions. After analysing the response, there was no clear consensus about any particular problem being bigger or more important than other, but some general conceptions are repeated by the 12 respondents:

#### **First question: The biggest problems/issues you are facing in using the learning agreement:**

##### **a) students perspective**

**Timing.** It is difficult or impossible to fill in the LA properly before the start of the mobility. Some universities requires corrections in order to do the payment

**Finding information.** The LA is too long and complicated. It is quite easy to make mistakes when filling it in.

##### **b) from an administrative perspective**

**Timing:** Universities in Europe have different academic calendars.

**Lack of information:** The document cannot be filled in properly before mobility because of lack of information.

**Work load:** It takes a lot of time if it is to be done correctly. The many changes are very time consuming.

**After mobility part:** Time consuming, and not making sense.

**Format:** Sometimes there is no space for the signature.

The first format in Erasmus+ was much too long. The new format has too little space for writing.

**Signatures of responsible persons:** the responsible persons (outgoing) know there will be so many changes that are not willing to sign the document before it is finally agreed upon.

**Second question. Do you use the original EC format or did you adjust the LA to serve your purpose**

Original format: 4    Adjusted format: 8

Main changes:

The after mobility part was left out (tables C and D)

Adjustment of the columns to make the information legible

Changing of the layout to make it clearer, taking away footnotes

**Third question: Does the LA give your students any guarantee to recognition of credits and grades. Is it as binding as Brussels experts/wishes**

Generally, the respondents answered 'yes' here. But with some modifications, like the fact that in one case (Austria and Norway) there is another document which is really authoritative when recognition is given (Vorausbescheid).

**Major findings of the workshop/discussions**

There was one **presentation of best practice of the LA**. Masaryk university showed how a digitalisation of the LA can be done. They have designed an interactive document where all information is given electronically, it is saved and can be updated when necessary. It is an administrative tool that covers all need of information for the student and the administrator for planning the mobility and later the recognition and integration of the courses in the home degree.

The presentation was received with huge interest by the participants at the seminar.

The **workshop** consisted in the group being divided into smaller group that would respond to a set of questions about the LA.

The workshop was a very entertaining experience. It was not so focused on the actual document but more on the different processes related to filling and processing the LA. It brought to the table problematics like: (Why is it so difficult for students to find correct info)

Different academic calendars, laziness, difficult to plan so long ahead.

One question on the workshop was: Why did you (not) adjust the LA?

Here the responses were:

Adapt it to the needs of the university/students/staff

Try to make it more clear and easy for students to fill in. + Professors signing

To comply with national requirements

To leave out the non-necessary parts (mainly tables C and D)

At the end of the session, we had a summing up and making of priority areas for future work with the LA at our home institutions. The work flow of the LA and the template were two important issues. University of Thessaloniki has an illustration of the LA work flow for students on their website, and it was also discussed in one of the groups. The LA template is something that all/most institutions (?) would like to adjust, and there should be more flexibility for changing the LA template so that it fits the need of each country/university rules and regulations.

## THE EVALUATION

The participants' evaluation of the seminar was a whole very positive. At the moment of writing it has been evaluated by 14 out of 17 participants (not including the two Bergen organizers). The response on some of the questions sums it up:

What is your overall impression of the seminar was : Good 3 Very good: 11. Average 4,79 ( five highest possible)

What is Your opinion on the relevance of the whole seminar for your work at your home institution?

Some relevance: 2 Quite relevant: 5 Very relevant: 7. Average 4,36 (five highest possible)

The overall score of satisfaction with the three parts of the seminar: (five highest possible)

Language competence: average 4.29

Interinstitutional Agreement: average 4,29

Learning agreement: average 4,79

## CONCLUSION

It would be fair to sum up the questionnaire and the workshop in the following way.

The seminar focused on sharing practices and experiences, and we found out that the universities have worked hard to adjust the proposed LA format to their existing systems and needs. The group concluded that not having a LA would complicate communication between universities, yet the need for simplifying the form was underlined in all discussion groups.

The Learning Agreement:

There is a lot of information to be filled in. Some of it appears not necessary.

The LA sets up a number of absolute rules (minimum requirements). It seems that these rules can work only in a perfect world. The timing is one big problem. It is sometimes impossible to fill in the necessary information on courses to be taken because it is not available.

The wording of the LA is very absolute with “minimum requirements” which are not really taken seriously. The final part of the LA (tables C and D) is redundant since every university that participates in Erasmus+ mobility is expected to issue a transcript.

The LA has three parts, before mobility, during mobility and after mobility. In the real life almost nobody uses the final part. A few do fill in feeling it as an unnecessary work exercise. Actually many universities simply take it away.

The interinstitutional agreement:

The discussions and workshops of seminar was focused on the administration and policies concerning the erasmus agreements. Topics related to the document itself were not really treated at the seminar. The seminar did not really produce any suggestions as to changes or simplification of the interinstitutional agreement.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The utmost goal of the LA – to facilitate recognition of studies – could still be achieved if the following recommendations are considered:

- To remove the tables C and D (After mobility) from the LA, or alternatively, to make it optional.
- To remove the ‘minimum requirement’ wording from the Guidelines. Instead a wording like ‘the LA can be adjusted to the needs of the institutions as long as the basic principles of the students as expressed in the Erasmus charter are maintained’.