

The contribution of Erasmus+ projects to youth employability at University of Alcalá, UAH, Spain

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The 2011 EU modernisation agenda identifies key policy issues for Member States and higher education institutions “seeking to maximise their contribution to Europe’s growth and jobs”, COM (2011: 3). Priority 2 in the agenda makes reference to the importance of improving the quality and relevance of higher education, while priority 3 sets the importance of strengthening quality through mobility and cross-border cooperation and priority 4 recommends linking higher education, research and business for excellence and regional development. Since 2014, University of Alcalá (UAH) has been participant and coordinator of several Erasmus + projects aiming to the development of these priorities. EMPLOI, CAPQI, BEST+ or AHEH are some of the Erasmus+ projects that will be presented with discussion of the activities that will hopefully contribute to the employability of university graduates.

KEY WORDS

Youth employability, EU modernisation agenda, Erasmus+ projects, Internships

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Introduction

In this chapter we will present and discuss some of the projects being currently developed or recently completed at University of Alcalá (UAH henceforth) within the framework of ERASMUS+ projects, aiming at improvement of the quality and relevance of higher education while strengthening quality through mobility and cross-border cooperation and contributing to graduates employment. UAH is a university which combines tradition and innovation. Its foundation dates back to the 16th century, when it was established as a higher education college by Cardinal Cisneros. It was later founded as a new institution in 1977 and its intellectual, cultural and architectural heritage has been recovered along these years. The university's beauty and richness of its buildings, together with its historical contribution to arts and science, gained UNESCO’s declaration of the University of Alcalá as a World Heritage Site in 1998.

UAH enjoys an international and cosmopolitan atmosphere with many international students (more than 6000 per year) which situates Alcalá in the first position among Spanish universities in the ranking of internationalisation. It is also included in the QS ranking “100 top under 50” with a five QS star rating.

UAH offers degrees in five branches of knowledge: Arts and Humanities, Law and Social Sciences, Sciences, Health Sciences, and Engineering and Architecture. Its approximately 30,000 students are spread across its three campuses: The Historical Campus houses the humanities, architecture, the social sciences and law. The Science and Technology Campus, situated on the city's outskirts, is home to the Sciences, including the Health professions, and Engineering. The Guadalajara Campus, 25 kilometres to the east from Alcalá, is well-connected with both Alcalá de Henares and Madrid. Education, Nursing and Architecture are taught here.

The study fields covered are: Electronics, Computing and Telecommunications Engineering, Business and Economics, Philosophy and Letters, Biology, Environmental Sciences, Medicine, Pharmacy, Laws, Documentation, Chemistry, Tourism, Nursery and Physiotherapy, Architecture and Geodesy, Sports Sciences, Pedagogy. The University host annually 16000 Undergraduate Students, 13000 Graduate Students, 2100 Teaching and Research Staff, 800 Administrative Staff, 450 Research Assistants, 140 Research Groups. This totals with 38 Undergraduate Degrees, 46 Research Masters Programs, 25 PhD Programs.

In its strategic plan, UAH includes the need to develop a specific programme to support entrepreneurship and build an employment observatory in order to get to know the process of graduates in the access to the labour market and facilitate their employment.

Internationalisation and employability are thus, two priorities ranking high in the agenda of UAH, which is involved in a wide variety of EU-funded projects. Many of these projects have been applied for in collaboration with the European University Foundation (EUF henceforth). EUF is a network of 22 universities established in 16 European countries. It stands for diversity and social fairness in Higher Education and aims to accelerate the modernisation of the European Higher Education Area. The network deploys intensive cooperation and policy experimentation under five key pillars:

- Digital Higher Education both for governance and provision of education
- Entrepreneurship and employability skills of graduates
- Policy innovation at national and European level
- Active citizenship of students
- Quality mobility for all

In the last 4 years, UAH and EUF have been successful in getting funding for more than twenty projects aiming at the internationalisation and employability of graduates as primary goals.

1. Improving the quality and relevance of higher education while strengthening quality through mobility and cross-border cooperation

UAH includes the following as orientations for its strategic plan: Excellence in research and development, excellence in education, business excellence, socially responsible behaviour, employee satisfaction, innovation in research and development. Contributing to these strategic orientations involves strengthening quality and relevance of higher education, which will be enhanced through mobility and cross-border cooperation. This

means contributing to excellence in Europe, not only in the fields of education and research but in business and society. Higher education is an essential component in the construction of society and as such, we should emphasise its importance in the internationalisation of our respective countries towards the construction of Europe. The Commission's proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020 includes a significant increase in the budget devoted to investment in education, research and innovation and gives these reasons:

This is because education, and in particular higher education and its links with research and innovation, plays a crucial role in individual and societal advancement, and in providing the highly skilled human capital and the articulate citizens that Europe needs to create jobs, economic growth and prosperity. Higher education institutions are thus crucial partners in delivering the European Union's strategy to drive forward and maintain growth. COM (2011: 2).

Erasmus+ is the EU's programme to support education, training, youth and sport in Europe, as can be read in the web of the European Commission (europa.eu). Set to last until 2020, Erasmus+ does not only have opportunities for students. Merging seven prior programmes, it has opportunities for a wide variety of individuals and organisations and includes specific aims related to employability: "Specific issues tackled by the programme include: Reducing unemployment, especially among young people, Promoting adult learning, especially for new skills and skills required by the labour market" (European Commission at europa.eu).

Erasmus+ projects can greatly contribute to strengthening quality through mobility and cross-border cooperation by facilitating sharing of knowledge by academics, staff and students of different institutions in different countries. Here follows a description of some of the projects related to employability in which UAH has been/ is currently engaged, together with the topics dealt with and the impact foreseen.

2. CAPQI Project (Collective Awareness Platforms for Quality of Internships)

This project, funded by Erasmus + Programme within Strategic Partnerships, is an illustrative example of collaboration among several types of organizations: NGOs, Universities, Foundations and Enterprises. The main goal of this project is the development of software tools for the assessment and enhancement of the quality of internships. Based on the approach of a small consortium (7 partners) led by UAH, the project has achieved the main intended goals.

CAPQI was born in 2016 with the main aim to collect interns' opinion on their internships and give visibility to that information through the creation of a ranking of companies. To achieve this aim, it was necessary to establish a realistic but complete set of indicators to cover the main features of an internship to be evaluated (salary, work conditions, recognition of skills, a future plan, etc.). The Transparency At Work (TAW) tool tries to collect all interns' reviews and set-up a ranking of companies from the interns' point of view through a labelling system. In this sense, the organizations will be able to disseminate the interns' point of view into their own companies.

Internships are currently a relevant trend into the HEI roadmaps. However, there are no clear and common regulations across Europe in order to guarantee a minimum level of quality in the development of the internships, traineeships or placements. The common EU framework offers the partner countries the flexibility and freedom to establish National policies related to internships. Thus, each country can set up a local set of regulations to be applied into the internship framework. CAPQI project has analysed the current status of several EU countries with different regulations. The detected problems into the internship fields are very common in all the countries studied. There are no reliable policies to set instruments and indicators in order to assess the quality of internships. This is an interesting issue, especially as the number of internships are increasing every year. Companies and organizations have seen the benefits of internships with some positive results, thanks to discussion and implementation of new initiatives, which have also resulted in an increase of the motivation of their employees, and, in many cases, in the internationalization of their business.

CAPQI has found that the number of internships is continuously increasing and internships are gaining a good reputation in the companies but there are no instruments to assess their quality. Moreover, one of the main problems detected in HE students's training is the lack of intercultural skills, which are not usually included in Academic Curricula and prove to be especially relevant in internships abroad. In order to address and solve this issue an on-line portfolio of self-training courses are provided by the project.

Knowing that it is an ambitious project and it is not possible to solve all the problems related to the quality of internships, CAPQI has tried to give a small step in the improvement of our students in the development of internships.

3. EMPL-OI Project (European Mobility Placements for Open Innovation)

The EMPL-OI initiative aims at the promotion of international part-time placements. This project, funded by a Strategic Partnership Call and led by the University of Nice (France) has developed an innovative scheme in partner countries to approach the placement sector to international students under a Erasmus + Mobility grant.

As we can read on the website of the project, (<http://empl-oi.eu/>) EMPL-OI allows students to earn competencies that are valuable in the labor market and thereby increase the employability of prospective graduates. The involvement of professionals in the project activities and the experience they share allows the students a more hands-on curriculum that is attuned to the current needs of the job market. This project fosters dynamic and targeted cooperation between international universities and companies by requiring that students act across traditionally set boundaries. It promotes one year long mobility, rather than single semester stays, in order to allow for deeper immersion in the host country both culture and language-wise.

The consortium partners designated a Hub Leader in each partner country who would be in charge of the cooperation between international students and local companies. In that sense, it is important to note that the English language was used in order to promote this initiative to all students, many without any previous knowledge of the local language of

host countries. In addition, in order to increase the number of mobilities, an innovative method was implemented for placements, pairing local students with incoming students in tandems. Therefore, local students could act as guides in order to help incomings acquire and understand the local culture. This also promoted the concept of internationalisation at home and provided opportunities for non-mobile students to increase awareness about cultural differences, while doing professionally related tasks in close cooperation with incoming students.

This new scheme for placements was not the only contribution of this project. Development of the social and entrepreneurial skills of students from HEIs was another relevant topic. An open on-line platform hosting several modules related to entrepreneurship was developed for their autonomous learning. Therefore, the main issues related to social entrepreneurship were addressed by the EMPLOI consortium.

The main difficulty was to combine studies with jobs. The complexity of schedules had a negative impact on the students' performance. They usually chose to prioritise their studies over their jobs. In order to solve this problem, full time placements during summer time were facilitated.

4. AHEH, Arts and Humanities Entrepreneurship Hubs.

The Arts and Humanities Enterprise Hubs (AHEH) project is an Erasmus + Knowledge Alliance funded programme. This three-year project started in January 2018 and brings together an alliance of 14 partners from 7 European countries: Croatia, Finland, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain and United Kingdom. They are led and coordinated by Swansea College of Art, UWTSD. As stated on the website of University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD henceforth), this is the main objective of the consortium "Partners from academia and industry will work together to jointly research, design, test and disseminate a programme of entrepreneurial training for Arts and Humanities staff and students". It is a fact that European Arts and Humanities students have extra difficulties to access the labour market:

European Arts and Humanities students face challenges with accessing graduate level employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. These courses typically do not have a direct route to the job market, reflected in higher unemployment and lower salaries. There can be a lack of knowledge from academics about aligning subject expertise with wider industry need as well as a lack of recognition by businesses of the wider benefits and skill sets of Arts and Humanities graduates. (AHEH at UWTSD website)

While other disciplines, such as business, economics and ICT faculties may have easier routes to the labour market, Arts and Humanities need a tailored A&H entrepreneurship model:

Dedicated support in HEIs for entrepreneurial activity has been mainly focused on business, economics and ICT faculties. A&H Students come from a very different starting point, with education and skills that do not meet industry need

in an obvious way. Therefore, a fresh approach is needed to develop a tailored A&H entrepreneurship model that improves the long-term entrepreneurial prospects for A&H students. (AHEH website)

These are more specific aims for the AHEH alliance:

- Jointly research, design, test and disseminate an innovative programme of entrepreneurial training for A&H staff/ students aligned with the EntreComp Competence Framework. This builds upon partners' prior experience of EU-funded enterprise projects.
- Have HEIs, businesses and stakeholders working together to champion the value of A&H students to a wider audience and ensure that industry need is reflected in the training programmes.
- Create 7 new A&H Entrepreneurship Hubs situated in partner faculties. These will be the specialist conduits for permanently improving the entrepreneurial skill-sets of A&H staff and students as well as a template for wider exploitation.
- Create a website that will complement the 7 Hubs as an ongoing resource-base for disseminating/exploiting outputs. These include:
 - 3 training programmes: HEI, A&H Students, Businesses
 - 3 manuals: Trainers, Users, AHEH Management
 - 2 contextual reports: Academic & Business

The partnership will offer further opportunities to develop student exchange programmes and to explore shared research interests and opportunities for international collaboration. We are in the first year of this project and hence, we can not offer results yet.

5. BEST+ project (Blended Erasmus+ Staff Training)

As stated on the project website (beta.blendedmobility.eu), the BEST+ projects aims to innovate the way university staff members working in international relations develop their competences, which will have a positive effect in the quality of mobility at HE. To achieve this goal, a cost efficient new methodology called blended staff mobility has been piloted, which combines traditional physical mobility with online material. In this context, an online platform has been developed, which serves as community platform for all university staff members working in international relations. The BEST+ Consortium, with partners from Belgium, Finland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland led by UAH, Spain, has developed three different courses relevant to improving the work of university staff and hence, the quality of mobility at HE. Additionally, the project has devised guidelines for blended staff mobility, describing the different methodologies that can be used to efficiently run blended staff mobility courses and to implement them in the online platform. Lastly, the project has the ambition to have a significant impact on EU policies, being part of an important policy shift towards a more digital Higher Education that is globally competitive.

Digital professional development and strong internationalisation at Higher Education institutions are two important pillars to achieve this goal. The project partners have

committed to derive policy recommendations and use the project results to impact the follow up programme of Erasmus+ and to create a mind shift within university leadership on how to further develop competences of their staff members.

The BEST+ project has been testing different methodologies for blended staff mobility through the three aforementioned courses. These were implemented on the platform, where the community can further develop the content by giving structured feedback on the courses. This community driven content ensures that courses will remain up to date as new developments in the field occur over time. It will also engage the community actively, increasing international cooperation between administrative university staff members. Around 100 staff members in international relations have been involved in the piloting phase and have been engaged to continuously develop and refine the project outcomes and to ensure that by the end of the project, an online platform with at least three pilot courses is available to the community.

The creation of such a new form of professional development for both administrative and academic staff members working in international relations will not only boost their everyday motivation and involvement in the international community but also have a positive effect on the quality of their work, which in turn impacts hundreds of thousands of international students and staff each year. As a result, the quality of mobility will increase considerably. Having university staff members in international relations experience mobility themselves will make them ambassadors mobility, which will also increase the likelihood of students to engage in mobility and increase their possibilities to find employment. The project therefore contributes to the achievement of a range of EU priorities, such as 20 per cent of mobile students by 2020 and the implementation of new digital teaching methods.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The high priorities of internationalisation and employability of HE institutions together with some of the key policy issues in the 2011 EU modernisation agenda show the importance of improving the quality and relevance of higher education, strengthening quality through mobility and cross-border cooperation and linking higher education, research and business for excellence and regional development among other goals. University of Alcala (UAH) has been participant and coordinator of several Erasmus + projects aiming to the development of these priorities. EMPLOI, CAPQUI, BEST or AHEH are some of the projects that have been presented with discussion of the activities implemented in an attempt to contribute to the employability of university graduates. These projects have met some challenges, such as the following:

- Students are not fluent in the language of host countries and are not familiar with their job markets, which makes it difficult to find an appropriate host organization or company.
- Entrepreneurial skills can vary greatly among countries and are not sufficiently integrated in the academic curricula of most universities. There are skills mismatches, in particular of transversal and entrepreneurial skills.

- It was difficult to have students combine studies with jobs. The complexity of schedules had a negative impact on the students' performance. They usually chose to prioritise their studies over their jobs.

These and other challenges have been met by providing solutions which can be implemented in the future by other HE institutions, organizations and students:

- Have student tandems (host and incoming) and therefore promote internationalisation at home and provide opportunities for non-mobile students to increase awareness about cultural differences. Promote one year long mobility, rather than single semester stays to allow for deeper immersion in the host country.
- Development of the social and entrepreneurial skills of students from HEIs through an open on-line platform hosting several modules related to entrepreneurship for autonomous learning. Add an extra dimension to studying abroad, by engaging in professional activities in addition to academic experience abroad (part-time placements in addition to academic studies).
- In order to solve the problems derived from combining studies with jobs, full time placements during summer time were facilitated.

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