

FESC Policy Recommendations

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Abbreviations

EC – European Commission

EU – European Union

FESC – Framework for Erasmus Staff Competences

HEI – Higher Education Institution

HR – Human Resources

HRM – Human Resources Management

IRO – International Relations Officer



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I. About the FESC project

As the requirements for the administration of mobility programmes increase in complexity, the need for clearly structured, comprehensive guidelines, as well as practical toolkits for training and peer-group learning for staff members is rapidly increasing. Thus, the Erasmus+ KA2 project “Framework for Erasmus+ Staff Competencies” aims to assist higher education institutions (HEIs) in improving the quantity and quality of student mobility by creating a competence framework for staff members working with student mobility and by developing tools and guidelines for (self-) assessment purposes and professional development.

The project is coordinated by the University of Marburg, (Marburg, Germany), <https://www.uni-marburg.de/en>.

The partners in the FESC project are (in alphabetical order):

- European University Foundation (EUF) - <https://uni-foundation.eu>
- Ghent University (UGent) – <https://www.ugent.be/en>
- Hanze University of Applied Sciences – <https://www.hanze.nl/eng>
- University of Latvia (UL) – <https://www.lu.lv>
- University of Warsaw (UW) - <http://en.uw.edu.pl>

And the associate partners:

- Saint Petersburg State University – <https://english.spbu.ru>
- Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe - <https://www.unica-network.eu>
- International Relations Offices Forum - <http://www.irosforum.pl>
- European Network of Erasmus Coordinators in Political Science, International Relations, Public Administration and Management (ENEC).



II. Understanding the centrality of international relations in modern higher education

It would be anathema to try to imagine a university that does not engage in international cooperation and exchanges, or whose research activities are not imbued by a rich network of contacts and collaborations. Universities are among the oldest public or private institutions to have cast their gaze beyond their cities, regions and countries, serving as hubs for exchanging knowledge regardless of their provenance.

Global pandemics aside, international cooperation activities in general, and student mobility programmes in particular, are becoming more sophisticated and complex, which has a knock-on impact on the IROs and expectations international relations officers (IROs) must fulfil. The increased importance of topics like digitisation or quality assurance is contributing to accelerate the demand for specialised knowledge among IROs. We expect the new Erasmus+ programme (2021-2027) and the horizontal goals that the European Commission (EC) is defining in areas such as carbon neutrality, inclusion and civic engagement, new formats of mobility and new quality and impact criteria for project management to accentuate this trend.

The emergence of the likes of European University Alliances may further contribute to the metamorphosis of IROs roles, which are increasingly tasked to carry out cutting-edge activities that reflect the ambition of their institutions and set an ever-higher bar for excellence in internationalisation.

Understanding the evolution of the requirements and expectations that define the daily work of the IROs is thus essential for universities that, in an increasingly interconnected world, can ill afford to not put international cooperation front and center. Constructs such as the European Education Area, in turn, also rely on universities which are intrinsically internationally minded.

III. Why Erasmus Staff Competences matter?

While increased requirements and the growing complexity of tasks outlined exert considerable pressures on IROs when staff members step into the position



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of professionals working with student mobility, they generally don't start the job as experts in the topics of international mobility. Due to lack of resources and time, they often also don't receive a detailed introduction to their tasks, learning on the job.

Another aspect that needs to be considered is that professional development options for IROs are quite limited in scope – existing options are often very general (mostly focused on soft skills) or sometimes not available at all. In order to achieve high-quality student mobility, it is important to ensure IRO staff is well-qualified and motivated, staying at the job position longer in a way that accrues institutional know-how. However, the development of staff competences in the field of internationalisation is a relatively recent subject and further actions are required to be put into practice in order to meet the HEIs internationalisation goals. Issues related to the recognition of career progression are also apparent; in many cases the only form of recognition is still a certificate of attendance, while there should be other methods to award the efforts and the improvement of competences of the IROs.

To this extent, the FESC project is intended as a response to the needs of staff working with mobile students and aims to contribute to the quality of student mobility.

This paper builds on the findings of the analysis carried out in the FESC project, which aims at enhancing our understanding of how to improve the professional development of IROs. Attaining this goal will require raising awareness among decision and policy makers, from individual to institutional, national and international policy level, about the role of the IROs in the high-quality student mobility. Therefore, these policy recommendations are intended as the start of a conversation involving Erasmus coordinators at faculty and central level, IRO leadership, rectors and vice-rectors at universities, heads of Human resources (HR) offices, National Agencies, Ministries and the European Commission.

We must stimulate the further development and recognition of Erasmus Staff competences, seeing how the enhanced effectiveness and more widespread availability of professional development programmes is likely to play an important role in improving the quality of how we implement student mobility across Europe.

We will focus on the core issues related to the IROs competences and we will look at recommendations, including solutions that have been identified



following discussions carried out by the project team (during the design of the Framework for Erasmus Staff Competences, the FESC guidelines, the study visits and the online training).

For example, the study visits were conducted at the 6 University partners and helped us have direct discussions with more than 80 IROs, leadership and human resources representatives and gather valuable opinions that we took into consideration in this paper. Moreover, the online training conducted between December 2020 and January 2021 allowed us to interact with more than 350 practitioners in the field and better understand their needs.

The policy recommendations are highlighting concrete points of actions that each of the above-mentioned target groups can take, combined with concise explanations and where appropriate with examples, best practices or concrete proposals for policy changes. These recommendations are geared to practitioners, institutions and the macro-EU level; national level recommendations were deliberately eschewed because while rules that directly affect specific HR management aspects often vary across jurisdictions, which would require a more granular analysis; this is confirmed by the conclusions of the Erasmus+ project REALISE, which also found difficult to make recommendations at national level as national policies and regulations are “radically different from country to country”(REALISE project partners, 2019, p.9). The FESC project activities have however shown a great deal of commonalities regarding the circumstances and challenges the staff in various countries are faced with.

IV. Summary of recommendations related to Erasmus+ staff competences development.

The following table (Table 1) will present a list of recommendations related to the Erasmus+ staff competences development, divided by micro, meso and macro levels. Furthermore, in the next section, we will describe the context of each of those recommendations.

Table 1:

Level	Topic	Recommendations
Practitioner level (micro)	Individual professional	1. Using self-assessment tool during professional development planning.



	development planning	<p>2. Ownership of one's own professional development.</p> <p>3. Improving time management skills</p>
Institutional level (meso)	Clear understanding of the Erasmus staff competence development	<p>1) Leverage on Framework for Erasmus Staff Competences and the FESC guidelines for the purpose of recruiting new team members and defining their roles.</p> <p>2) Developing a handbook for new team members and Erasmus language glossary.</p>
	Defining clear roles and responsibilities	<p>3) Ensuring a good team environment and well-defined tasks and responsibilities.</p> <p>4) Map and invest on cooperation and collaboration</p>
	Offering professional development options for IROs	<p>5) Identifying the specific training needs of the IROs and developing tailor-made courses.</p> <p>6) Providing IROs with sources of online professional development courses and encouraging them to attend.</p>
	Awareness raising of the IROs' responsibilities	7) Raising awareness about the importance of IROs at the University.
	Recognition of professional development options	8) Improving the institutional recognition of IROs competences development, making it formal.
European level (macro)	Recognition of professional development options	1) Establishing a comprehensive competence framework for international relations officers.
	Open access to trainings	2) Promoting the usage of open educational resources and establishing a European index of online resources for IROs.
	Quality Assurance	3) Establishing quality assurance measures.



II. Recommendations

A. Practitioner level (micro)

Individual professional development planning

1) Using a self-assessment tool during professional development planning.

Self-assessment is an excellent way for individuals to be aware about their own strengths and weaknesses, and if aggregated it can provide an important key performance indicator for the leadership regarding capacity and levels of performance. The lack of such a tool can cause frustration and feeling of disorientation in the workplace.

2) Ownership of one's own professional development.

There is an incredible power in taking responsibility of one's career, as deciding what are the personal goals for one's career development can be both rewarding and motivating. Once this decision is made, available options will be much better understood. One of the options that is specifically made for Erasmus+ staff members is the [Framework for Erasmus Staff Competences](#) and [the FESC self-assessment tool](#). Due to increasing complexity of tasks, the demands of competences of staff members have increased. However, there is insufficient transparency about what competences staff members are supposed to have or develop. The Framework and the FESC self-evaluation tool can help with this. The Framework is offering a frame of reference about competences that IROs should have, and the self-evaluation tool to evaluate the degree of achievement of particular knowledge, skills and attitudes related to the specific job.



B. Institutional level (meso)

The support and flexibility of the HEIs are the key for success for any development strategy of the institutions. A survey conducted in 2017 as part of the Erasmus+ funded project SUCTI, revealed that 82,8% of HEIs don't require staff to undertake training. Such training options should become the norm, rather than the exception, and they ought to be strategically planned and initiated by the HEI in order to positively impact internationalisation and the quality of student mobility programmes.

Clear understanding of the importance of Erasmus staff competence development

Stakeholder engagement, in the face of HEI's management and HR teams, is particularly important in the context of enhancing the Erasmus staff competence development. Stakeholder engagement is different from stakeholder management: stakeholder engagement implies a willingness to listen, understand and consider changes in the aim to achieve a certain goal. In this context, IRO leadership and staff should apply a good communication and engagement strategy to approach decision makers within the HEI. On the one hand, they should be aware of the priorities and concerns of their institution and articulate clearly the benefits of the improvement of IROs staff competences in certain domains (e.g. digitalisation) to the global strategic goals of HEIs. On the other hand, IRO managers should initiate a dialogue with the HR, in order to help the latter understand and evaluate what is missing in the current training resources and match the training format with the training needs of IROs. Both management and HR should have a clear overview of what IRO staff members are dealing with at their workplace and what competences they should have. HR are further responsible for the recruitment of new staff (very often together with the Heads of IRO departments) and for updating the professional development needs at the institution. Thus, once there is a common understanding between stakeholder and IROs the communication and collaboration between all will facilitate the establishment of a professional development scheme for Erasmus+ staff members. The below two recommendations are provided with supporting tools and documents that exist or could be created to contribute to the clear understanding of the tasks and the skills related to the IROs' job.



- 1) Leverage on Framework of Erasmus Staff Competences and the FESC guidelines for the purpose of recruiting new team members and defining their roles.

The activities carried out during the project show that the FESC Framework is a powerful tool for each stakeholder to understand the tasks and competences that the IROs should have to fulfil at their workplace. The guidelines, on the other hand, show specifically how to use the framework for the IROs, HR (recruitment and career development units) and HEIs. Their purpose is to stimulate and require from the management and the HR office to be aware of the tasks performed by the IROs and prepare tailor-made competence development training for them. The Framework is offering a frame of reference / a shared language to come to an agreement about competence development in the framework of human resources management (HRM) cycle. Another important issue that it can solve is related to the emancipation of the work in international relations. It sets off in the form of a matrix all kinds of mobility-related tasks; tasks related to before, during and after mobility, and infrastructural and cross-cutting tasks, against competences which are a combination of knowledge, skills and attitude. The Framework can be a very useful tool for HR offices to prepare a tailor-made job description for the position of IRO or Erasmus+ coordinator. Furthermore, it can be a useful tool in the assessment of staff members, in terms of job appraisal/evaluation, facilitating and planning professional development.

- 2) Developing a handbook for new team members and Erasmus language glossary.

The IRO staff have to be involved in the whole mobility process and not only partially. Therefore, it is important to provide general information about the global tasks to be performed gradually, especially for staff who are new to the mobility world. A handbook showing the basics of the general mobility process is a useful tool and allows the team to be able to take over each other's tasks in case of mobility, annual leave or other absences. Such a handbook could be used as a summary in combination with the FESC Framework, to facilitate the understanding of decision makers and recruiters of the roles and responsibilities of IROs.

Another tool seeking to encourage the employees to use the Erasmus language appropriately is the [Erasmus language glossary](#), prepared and presented by the FESC project partner Ghent University during the [FESC training](#). The glossary is a list of terms and abbreviations and can be very interesting for new employees



in the International relations office (central and faculty level) or for newly appointed Erasmus coordinators, who have an academic background. Erasmus indeed has a special language, and it can be useful even for practitioners that are not new in the field. It can also be used to raise awareness about the Erasmus+ terms and abbreviations among the other colleagues and students at the University.



Defining clear roles and responsibilities

3) Ensuring well-defined roles and responsibilities.

Clearly the role and profile of IROs has altered quite considerably over recent years. Many staff have found themselves taking on higher levels of responsibility and playing an increasingly central role in the internationalisation of HEIs. This requires the HEIs to ensure continuous productivity, balance and well-being of the IROs team. Undoubtedly to achieve this healthy team environment a good planning of the IRO team responsibilities is needed. First and foremost, IRO leadership has to establish clear roles to their team members. Setting expectations is another important factor to raise the effort and engagement of staff members. Finally, the number of staff members should be commensurate with the amount of work. Thus, open discussions at all levels within the HEI are necessary in order to assess the eventual need of hiring more human resources.

4) Map and invest in cooperation and collaboration.

International relations are a collaborative activity by its very nature, inherently relying on cross-border cooperation with partners from around Europe and beyond. However, the success of such activities often relies on close cooperation with many local actors, with whom a collaborative approach can significantly enhance the impact of the international activities. A perfect – if not the only – example of such synergies is those that international relations offices establish with student organisation.

There are numerous ways that the student organisations and IROs can collaborate with each other and many activities which can be organised jointly. Moreover, joint efforts and shared work could make everyone's job richer and more rewarding and thus, improve the motivation and work environment. Many examples around Europe of such collaborations exist already and it is strongly advised that HEIs continue encouraging and reinforcing such initiatives between IROs, engaged students and volunteers.

Here below we list several activities which can be organised jointly.

- Service oriented activities
 - Buddy services
 - Accommodation assistance
- Cultural activities
 - Cultural visits
 - Local culture events



- Linguistic lessons
- Promotion of mobility
 - Promoting Erasmus+ and other mobility programmes
 - Creating promo materials
 - Organising presentations together
 - Assisting with the reintegration of returned students

Access the list of students' organisations in Europe and worldwide [here](#).

Offering professional development options for IROs

5) Identifying the specific training needs of the IROs and developing tailor-made courses.

The training programme planners at each university should design effective programmes that will help achieve realistic and well-defined objectives. The approach for this includes once again the cooperation between the HR and the IRO offices, working together on designing the training programmes and identifying the expected outcomes. Not only the management, but also the staff members themselves should be involved in this cooperative effort, participating in an organised survey on identifying their training needs, the training formats, activities and assessment criteria. Here, the Framework of the FESC project could play a crucial role in the process, as it gives a detailed list of tasks performed by the target group and therefore, an idea of the competences that should be developed or improved. This recommendation is also part of a more detailed strategic planning described below.

6) Providing IROs with sources of online professional development courses and encouraging them to attend.

The historical year 2020 has shown us that change is everlasting and that we must be prepared for anything at any time. It became more and more important to ensure that staff members must have access to competence development opportunities. Fortunately, the number of trainings increased during the pandemic and became even more accessible due to their virtual format. With this change, it is important to remain aware of all opportunities that IROs have to stay professionally relevant or improve and acquire new skills. It is recommended to HEIs to remind or find new professional development tools that are available to IROs and stimulate their participation. Virtual training



options, webinars, conferences, mentorship or on-the-job opportunities are only a few of the great ways that IROs can take care of their professional growth.

Awareness raising of the IROs 'responsibilities

7) Raising awareness about the importance of IROs at the University.

IRO staff is still perceived, in some cases, as merely an undifferentiated part of the university administration, to an extent that fails to highlight their particular contribution for fulfilling the strategic goals of the institution. This in turn can negatively impact awareness about the centrality of these roles and the importance of developing them further.

To mitigate this problem HEIs can encourage regular meetings between academic and administrative staff, to exchange experience on specific topics, such as work environment, quality assurance of staff training, joint programmes, the future of the Erasmus+ programme and many others. These meetings would allow IROs to raise awareness about their contribution to the core activities of the university, sharing knowledge, tips and good practices, and interact with colleagues from other departments (e.g. academics, IT, leadership, etc.). These actions will contribute to a shared understanding of the importance of such roles, and perhaps spur ideas about training programmes on the topics of internationalisation (be it for IROs or to their colleagues).

Recognition of professional development options

“Recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes does not, in itself, create human capital. But recognition makes the stock of human capital more visible and more valuable to society at large.”

OECD, 2010

8) Improving and formalising the institutional recognition of IROs competences and their development.

Management, HR and IRO offices must cooperate in implementing a strategy for IRO staff competence development. They must work together on the creation of a methodological approach with clear standards and recognition modalities



for staff members who participate in career development activities. This methodological approach needs to include the following aspects:

1. Listing the competences exercised by:
 - Faculty Erasmus+ coordinator (at junior and senior level), which job focuses on exercising a set of mobility related processes.
 - Central IRO officer (at junior and senior level), whose job focuses on exercising a set of mobility related processes.
 - Central IRO manager, which focuses on policy related tasks (dealing with the HEI internationalisation strategy, partnerships, finances, reporting, etc).
 - Other posts related to student mobility (policy advisors, administrative advisors, project coordinators, etc)

Tip: Use the 29 tasks from the FESC framework and the FESC guidelines as a reference

2. Prioritising the competences (must have and should have).
3. Defining a selection criterion : If not established already, establish a selection criterion of what, who, when and how many times an individual should take a competence professional opportunity.

Tip: Along with the other criteria, the management could include the FESC self-assessment tool, to verify the areas of improvement by individual staff members.

4. Defining the offers and opportunities for the different competence development (e.g. job shadowing, attending staff week, online conference, online/physical, blended training).

Tip: Allow the HR team to lead this part as they know best what training delivery methods suit different competences development. .

5. Developing a full budget plan necessary to allocate for IROs competence development.
6. Defining an effective assessment and recognition model for each type of offer.

The recognition consists of assessment of acquired competence/s and issuing a recognition form. Assessments are an important part of professional development as they help consolidate and measure the performance. One of the results of the FESC project are the self-auditing forms addressing Advisors,



Student Advisors and Programme managers which can be used for self-auditing purposes, so that one can assess one's own strengths and competences that need to be developed further. The Framework can be used to further develop assessment methods of acquired competences. Finally, examples of recognition forms can be considered the following:

- Certificate provided by the HR upon completion of a training activity;
- Training hours automatically introduced into the staff member's curriculum;
- Digital badges;
- Bonuses.

C. European level (macro)

Establishing a comprehensive competence framework

1.

1) Adopting the Framework for Erasmus+ Staff Competences.

Given the importance of previously mentioned factors such as increased capacity requirements for IROs, changes in the Erasmus+ programme, increasing number of mobile students in ensuring the quality of student mobility, a better understanding and clarity of the IROs tasks and competences is essential. What we foresee as a solution relies on a clear staff competence framework to present a comprehensive overview of staff competences. The Framework for Erasmus+ Staff Competences of FESC outlines in detail the 29 main tasks related to supporting student mobility. It is intended as a frame of reference and a shared language that can be helpful in the recruitment of new staff members and/or in the planning of professional development of current staff members. Thus, we believe that this main result of the FESC project will contribute to the quality of international student mobility in Higher Education and to the emancipation of the work in international relations and invite decision and policy makers to undertake measures to adopt and further develop the Framework in a wider scope.

Open access to online trainings



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2) Promoting the usage of open educational resources and establishing a European index of online resources for IROs.

This part discusses the potential of online training to expand the opportunities for IRO staff learning and the importance of having a European index of online resources for IROs. The online training possibilities have overall substantially increased with the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and have motivated training providers to refine the design and the delivery of their courses. Encouraging online training provision for employees that deal with student mobility could have significant advantages. For instance:

- 1) It could help reach a significant number of learners with smaller investment.
- 2) It has the ability to reach an easier audience with fewer opportunities, be it adapting to visual or physical disabilities, compared to the physical training options.
- 3) It is offered at a much lower cost, due to savings related to travel, accommodation and organisational costs for the event.
- 4) The more inclusive and affordable access to online training, the more legality among IRO staff Europe-wide.

The other challenge related to the development of online training opportunities is finding them in one place. It would be useful if there is a virtual space/platform that collects online training options designed for IROs, giving access not only to the material, but also an opportunity to interact with one another, as this is the other most important form of learning.

Quality assurance and communication

3) Establishing quality assurance mechanisms.

While quality assurance often refers to courses, study programmes or institutions, the time might be approaching when the quality assurance of Erasmus+ as a whole needs to be holistically considered – and acknowledging the centrality of the role of IROs on the impact and results of mobility related activities. The logical culmination of the analysis carried out by the FESC project is asking ourselves if it is in our collective interest to define minimum requirements in terms of professional capacity towards HEIs which are responsible for managing a certain volume of EU funds.



Considering this proposal would represent a quantum leap relative to the current requirements and culture of the Erasmus+ programme it is important not to rush such a conversation, affording careful consideration to the advantages such an approach could carry and weighting them against well-known challenges the HE sector faces, such as excessive bureaucratisation. Other questions that call for an informed debate are the limits of bottom-up approaches to strengthening the role and capacity of IROs, and a clearer definition of the expected added-value/return of investment.

The project team feels the start of a new Erasmus+ programme, which contains within itself new requirements and challenges (e.g. digitisation) add to the timeliness of such reflections. We are confident that the competence framework outlined by FESC can play not just an important role in support the relevant decision makers in adopting tailored quality criteria for the further professionalisation of its university staff, but also help address the design, assessment and the continuous improvement of the competence development programmes, involving all stakeholders at all levels (practitioners, IRO leaders, HR, HEIs management). Regulation and standardisation could help ensure that the skills and competences are recognised and valued and, all things considered, bottom-up and top-bottom approaches could eventually complement each other to ensure international staff become even greater assets to the higher education ecosystem.



III. Conclusion

Before considering the findings of the FESC project as such we should ask ourselves a simple question: can we truly aspire to enable high-quality - and high-volume - student mobility without ensuring the staff that is at the heart of managing and further developing such programmes is highly skilled?

The answer to the question may seem obvious to many of us, but the FESC research and study visits revealed that we must do more to ensure the desired levels of impact, efficiency and quality in international cooperation activities. The centrality of IROs in modern higher education is simply too great for us to assume that a non-structured “learning on the job” approach is sustainable or desirable.

One of the most pressing challenges associated with providing professional development opportunities that are relevant and coherent is the development of a true competence framework that reflects the demanding and dynamic nature of the role of IROs. We believe the results of the FESC project may prove seminal in this respect, and we urge institutional leaders and policy makers to support their wide adoption and continued development.

When taken collectively International Relations Officers constitute a professional body whose commonalities are quintessentially supra-national. While countries committed to supporting the competitiveness of their universities will do well to pay special attention to supporting this particular staff category this is not the only – or the most obvious – way to improve the skills of a university staff which is already multilingual, has high levels of cultural intelligence and is both mobile and digitally literate. Universities themselves should consider joining forces to promote a more formalised approach to such matters, and consider tapping into the economies of scale that doing so together could allow.

In time other considerations may impact the planning and structuring of IRO teams, particularly if minimum capacity requirements would apply to institutions responsible for managing a certain volume of European funds in the domains of international cooperation. This would mark a shift from bottom-up initiatives led by institutions and practitioners and complement them with asserting top-bottom quality requirements that could contribute for the further professionalisation of the sector.



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