

Movetia booklet on the internationalisation of higher education

Erasmus+ programme Opportunities for higher education



Switzerland and the potential of participating in the Erasmus+ programme

We are pleased to present a new Movetia publication providing information concerning the mobility and international cooperation activities implemented in Europe since 2014. Published in the form of three booklets, it covers the three levels of school education, vocational training and higher education. The aim of this publication is to assess a large part of Movetia's activities up to and including 2019 and to highlight the potential of Swiss participation in the next generation of Erasmus+ 2021-27.

The Swiss programme for Erasmus+ was designed in 2014 in order to provide Swiss stakeholders in the field of education with funding instruments to encourage individual learning mobility and foster cooperation between Swiss and European educational institutions. Funded unilaterally by the Swiss government, the structure of this programme is based very closely on the European programme. This solution has facilitated the development of certain activities while nevertheless limiting the possibilities for international cooperation. Today, this limitation penalises stakeholders in the education system and places Switzerland in jeopardy of becoming marginalised.

International cooperation means access to networks and collaborative structures which enhance the education system and contribute to its development, its attractiveness and its level of excellence. Giving education a more international dimension also provides all stakeholders at every level with significant value added – the students, the institutions and the education system as a whole. While the momentum recently observed in the field of mobility and international cooperation has been curbed somewhat by the coronavirus pandemic, it is important to keep our eyes on the bigger picture: the importance of exchange, mutual understanding and openness to the world is clearer than ever and the contribution of these elements is strongly underlined in the management of a crisis such as the one currently facing us.

From numerous other standpoints, 2020 will be a singular year with regards to the strategic orientation adopted by Movetia. Through the "Education, Research and Innovation (ERI)" message, the Confederation will establish the financial framework for the field of exchanges and mobility for the next four years. Naturally, we are greatly optimistic that this will be sufficiently significant to enable us to move closer to the goals set by the "Exchanges and Mobility" strategy.

With regard to Erasmus+, the Federal Council will conduct a cost-benefit analysis over the coming year and, where applicable, will define the outline for a negotiating mandate for potential association to Erasmus+.

En route to the education of the future!

Josef Widmer
President of the Foundation Board

Olivier Tschopp
Director

Key points in a nutshell

Networking and competition opportunities for a strong European Higher Education Area – Switzerland included

The Erasmus+ programme provides an invaluable framework within which universities from 34 countries create joint educational and research initiatives, promote innovation in teaching and learning, and carry out peer learning activities. The programme has been substantially shaping the European Higher Education Area for years and was significantly expanded in 2017 with the establishment of “European Universities”. Such an initiative provides new and transformative systemic impetus for European higher education and enhances the competitiveness of the entire European Higher Education Area. If this raises quality standards, Switzerland will also benefit.

Strategic networks shape the future university landscape

Student and staff mobility cements the intense cooperation between universities and is firmly anchored in the programme. Both in the current programme generation 2014-20 and in the coming period 2021-27, however, the promotion of systematic and strategic cooperation comes to the fore as a clear response to the needs of universities. In future, cross-border cooperation is to take place with a small number of high-quality partnerships between higher education institutions. This will strengthen university networks and enable more comprehensive cooperation across subjects, departments, education and research. Swiss institutions are in the midst of this development, but are dependent on access to important networks, which is linked to participation in international education and research programmes.

The Swiss solution has its limits and marginalises Switzerland

Without an association with Erasmus+, Switzerland has only limited opportunities to participate and its involvement in shaping the European Higher Education Area is very restricted. A clear indication of this is the low level of participation of Swiss institutions in multilateral Erasmus+ cooperations in the years 2014-19: Austria with 174 and Switzerland with 24 projects.

It also seems clear from recent calls for projects and the more restrictive approach towards third countries, such as Switzerland and the United Kingdom, that the prestigious partnerships for excellence and innovation (e.g. “European Universities”) should not be open to third country institutions. This means that it would no longer be possible to dock on to European projects, even with own resources.

The Swiss programme for Erasmus+ has worked in the short term, but the gap with Europe is widening

The Swiss programme for Erasmus+ arose at short notice from the urgency of not being associated with Erasmus+ in 2014 in order to ensure the continuity of Swiss (student) mobility within Europe. Today, six years later, the effects of non-association and the limited possibilities of the Swiss solution are becoming apparent. The growth in mobility figures has generally slowed, in some areas the figures have slumped, and programme maintenance has become more complex: As a comparison, Austria records 26% more mobility under Erasmus+. The planned digitisation of the Erasmus+ programme administration will further increase the gap between Switzerland and Europe.

Europe builds on complementary funding programmes – It is essential that Switzerland takes part in shaping in these developments

The European programmes for education, research and innovation are strongly interlinked and will be even more so in the future as the aim is to generate more synergies between the programmes, especially between Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe. It is disadvantageous for Switzerland to only participate in certain programmes: Swiss universities should benefit from the comprehensive and complementary offerings of the education and research programmes.

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1 Initial situation

1.1 Background

The internationalisation of higher education is embedded at institutional level in Switzerland: it is a strategic objective at 70% of higher education institutions. Internationalisation is not a goal in itself for higher education institutions, but a means of increasing the quality of teaching and research as well as promoting innovation and enhancing the visibility, competitiveness and reputation of the particular institution in Switzerland and abroad. The main activities in the implementation of this strategic objective include student and researcher mobility and cross-border institutional cooperation.

Over the last 30 years, the European programmes for education and research – in particular the Erasmus programme but also the Marie Curie fellowships – have enabled a more strategic approach to internationalisation and have been extended continuously. The programmes define shared reference frameworks for the participating countries, secure continuity of financing and give new impetus to the internationalisation and realisation of the European Higher Education Area. This makes them central funding instruments for cooperation in the European Higher Education Area.

Switzerland first took part in the European education programme in 1992. Since then, it has been an associated programme country twice. As of 2014, it has no longer been associated and the Swiss Programme to Erasmus+ was introduced at short notice to replace mobility activities in higher education, vocational, school, adult education and extracurricular youth work. However, the Swiss programme does not cover the entire spectrum of activities and services of Erasmus+, so it only partially compensates for an association.

Networking and competition opportunities for a strong European Higher Education Area – Switzerland included.

1.2 The European Erasmus+ education programme

The European programme for education cooperation is called Erasmus+ and includes 34 programme countries in Europe. The name Erasmus+ is likely to be retained for the next generation of programmes 2021-27.

Under **Key Action 1: Learning Mobility of Individuals** Erasmus+ contains a wide variety of mobility activities for European and worldwide destinations. **The Key Action 2: Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices** supports cross-border university networks for strategic collaboration. Under **Key Action 3: Support for policy reform**, initiatives to bring about systemic changes, such as the digitisation of Erasmus+ programme administration, are supported. Erasmus+ also includes Jean Monnet activities (promoting teaching and research in European Union studies) and cooperation partnerships in the field of sport.

Many people are aware of the opportunity for young Europeans to use Erasmus+ to study or complete an internship in another country. But Erasmus+ in higher education involves much more. Since 2014, the promotion of international cooperation between higher education institutions in the form of partnerships, cooperation agreements and alliances has played an increasingly important role on the path to achieving comprehensive internationalisation, and the support instruments of Erasmus+ have been expanded continually. The most recent initiative is European Universities: strategic cooperation in education and research between higher education institutions will enhance the quality and competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area and build the universities of tomorrow.

Erasmus+ is a financing system for European educational cooperation primarily from and for its programme countries: the 27 member states of the European Union. Non-EU countries, such as the official candidate countries (Northern Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey) and the EFTA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway), associate themselves as programme countries with Erasmus+ by paying an agreed amount of contributions to the common European fund. The other countries of the world, including Switzerland, are divided into different regions and, depending on their regional classification, may participate as what are referred to as partner countries in certain activities of the programme, but with restrictions

The Swiss programme for Erasmus+ does not cover the entire spectrum of activities and services that Erasmus+ offers which is why it only partially compensates for an association.

Erasmus+: 34 programme countries cooperate within a jointly defined financial and legal framework.

(although they do not make a global contribution). Together with the Faroe Islands, Switzerland belongs to [Region 14](#).

2 Potential of Erasmus+ 2021-27 for Swiss higher education

The next programme generation of Erasmus+ 2021-27 focuses on “evolution, not revolution”. The aim is to optimise the existing programme by simplifying administrative procedures, removing barriers to mobility and cooperation, and generally implementing a more inclusive and sustainable programme. In the two Erasmus+ Key Actions (1: Individual Mobility and 2: Cooperation), a co-creation process has been underway for about two years, in conjunction with the national agencies, academic networks and student associations, to identify and design adaptations and new measures.

Educational institutions and organisations as well as national agencies of non-associated countries such as Switzerland, as so-called partner countries, cannot participate in the official bodies of Erasmus+ (programme committee, meetings and working groups of the national agencies). Consequently, Switzerland could only be involved in this participatory process through public consultations and could barely influence the development of the future generation of programmes.

2.1.1 Key Action 1: Global mobility and digitisation strategy as central innovations for individual mobility

The mobility of students and university staff is a key internationalisation measure for universities: stays abroad help university graduates to acquire the necessary international, intercultural, specialist and personal skills and boost their employability and chances of access to the working world.

As can be seen today from the official channels of the European Commission, the eligibility criteria for the classical Erasmus semester in Europe, i.e. student mobility (for a study visit and/or a traineeship) are to remain the same for the period 2021-27. The general conditions are also largely the same for staff mobility (for teaching assignments and/or further training). New elements of individual mobility are “blended mobility” (the combination of physical and virtual mobility) and short mobility opportunities for PhD candidates. Detailed information on these new developments is compiled in this [report](#).

The opening up and flexible promotion of global mobility is probably the most important new development in the individual mobility programme offer. Erasmus+ has been supporting mobility not only in Europe but also worldwide since 2014. From 2021, however, global mobility will be supported with considerable additional funds and the application process will be made more flexible: each institution can set its own priorities and the budget can be used for both outgoing and incoming mobility.

Erasmus+ promotes international mobility in Europe and all over the world.

In Switzerland, the interest in and the potential for promoting global mobility within the framework of a programme, such as already exists for European mobility, is very strong. Such promotion would standardise the quality and conditions (e.g. regarding grants) for all institutions. Until now, Swiss universities have supported global mobility very individually and in relation to their own resources and partner network.

2.1.2 Erasmus Without Paper EWP: exchange by mouse click

The digitisation of Erasmus+ has been progressing rapidly since 2014. The “European Student Card Initiative” brings together all initiatives aimed at digitising the administrative processes of programme administration. These include the Erasmus+-funded cooperation projects for the digitisation of programme administration, such as [Erasmus Without Paper EWP](#), but also the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) projects, which in particular ensure the online authentication of students.

The comprehensive approach of the European Student Card Initiative has the major advantage of being able to interconnect systems and create common standards for the organisation and administration of mobility, to offer students a common platform (e.g. Erasmus+ app) for information and identification, and in general to standardise and simplify cooperation between universities. This can massively reduce administrative costs and create more time and resources for partnerships, promotion of greater mobility and the development of inclusion measures.

For any mobility to and from Switzerland, Swiss institutions depend on cooperation with European universities. In the current programme generation Erasmus+, the parallel Swiss system is “tolerated”. However, the digitisation of mobility administration means an increasing standardisation of management at European level and the linking of all European systems. The question is to what extent European universities are prepared to take on a time-consuming additional process for Swiss universities.

The digitisation of the Erasmus+ administration is the great revolution of the next generation of programmes and a game changer: if Switzerland stands apart, this increases the risk of Swiss institutions being marginalised and additionally excludes them.

Game changer: the digitisation of the Erasmus+ administration increases the risk of marginalisation and additionally excludes Swiss institutions.

2.1.3 Individual mobility: Erasmus+ and the Swiss Programme for Erasmus+

The Swiss Programme for Erasmus+ was set up in 2014 as a replacement for the mobility activities of Erasmus+, but does not cover the entire spectrum of activities and services that Erasmus+ offers and thus only compensates in part for an association with the programme. The following table shows the current and future programme offers of Erasmus+ compared to the offers funded under the Swiss Erasmus+ programme between 2014 and 2020¹:

Learning Mobility of Individuals

Erasmus + 2014-20 / expected for 2021-27 Key Action 1	Swiss Programme to Erasmus+ 2014-20
Mobility in Europe for students and staff (mobility between programme countries)	Mobility in Europe for students and staff is supported by the Swiss-European Mobility Programme SEMP
Global mobility for students and staff (mobility between programme and partner countries)	No offer
Blended mobility: short-term physical mobility combined with a virtual component	No offer
Supporting measures for individual mobility: - Online Linguistic Support (free language courses and assessments for E+ participants in 24 languages) - Erasmus Without Paper: digitisation of programme administration	No offer

Figure1: Key Action 1 offers compared: Erasmus+ and Swiss Programme for Erasmus+

Not associating Switzerland but operating with a parallel programme means not only different offers but also a different financing system: since Switzerland makes no payments to the joint European fund set up to finance Erasmus+, associated countries cannot provide financial support for mobility activities with Swiss destinations. As a result, the Swiss programme must promote mobility out of and into Switzerland, i.e. outgoing mobility from Switzerland to one of the 34 Erasmus+ programme

¹ Key Action 1 of Erasmus+ also provides loans for stays abroad. Master’s students receive EU guaranteed loans with favourable repayment conditions.

countries and incoming mobility from one of these countries to Switzerland. The Incoming funding is the only way that the exchange with Europe, which is founded on mutuality, can be maintained.

2.1.4 Potential for more learning mobility in Switzerland not exhausted

The mobility figures of Swiss institutions for outgoing student mobility increased significantly during the association 2011-13. There was an average growth rate of 9% for this period. During the period of non-association, the average growth rate has levelled off at 5%.

The average growth rate of Swiss student mobility is below the European average.

At European level, the first years of the Erasmus+ programme generation 2014 to 2017 are characterised by an average growth of 8%. The Austrian growth line exemplifies this development. Austria, like Switzerland, first became associated with the European programme in 1992.

Swiss institutions have great growth potential: if Switzerland had been able to promote mobility within a stable framework, outgoing student mobility figures would most likely have been 13% higher today.

The chart below shows this potential. From 2014 onwards, the potential is calculated with the average European growth rate of the individual years 2014-17. From 2018, with the average European growth rate of the last 10 years (2008-18): 8.5%.

Development of student mobility

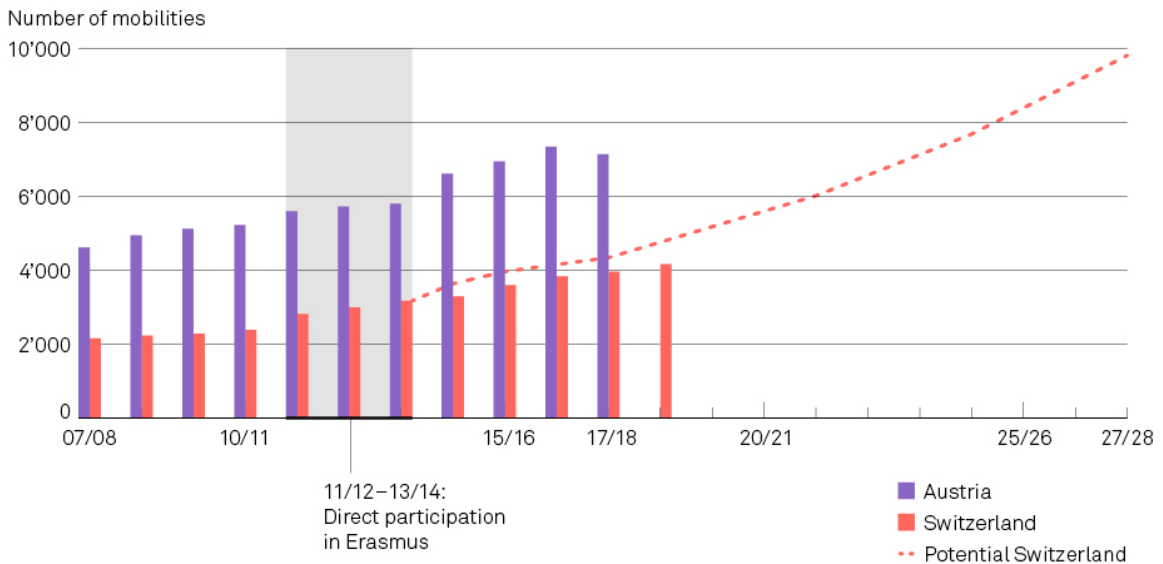


Figure 2: Potential of Swiss student mobility

2.1.5 Key Action 2: New instruments for cooperation and competition

The other focus of Erasmus+, along with individual mobility, is cross-border cooperation in higher education. This has been supported with significant programme funds since 2014. The promotion of cooperation projects is aimed at developing innovative approaches in education, creating new forms of cooperation and strengthening the exchange of knowledge and experience. The transfer of innovation should have a positive impact on the quality of education and the modernisation of higher education, bringing about systemic change and strengthening the competitiveness of the whole European Higher Education Area.

Participating in global issues and challenges not only boosts the visibility of the educational institutions involved, but also leads to an increase in know-how and strengthens the institutions' own experts and networks. Often, cooperation projects are the first step towards longer-term educational and research cooperation between institutions. The results of a recently published study on the impact of Erasmus+ cooperation projects in terms of sustainable cooperation are clear: in 90% of cases, cooperation between universities funded through strategic partnerships continued beyond the scope of their project.²

A Swiss solution has limits and marginalises Switzerland.

In the new programme generation 2021-27, stable, institutional cooperation will be a central element and will be supported by differentiated programme offerings. A total of three groups of projects are distinguished:

1. Partnerships for cooperation (the current strategic partnerships) with fixed budget: different fixed sums for different administrative costs. This will simplify the application procedure while creating a flexible instrument for low-threshold offers.
2. Partnerships for innovation, referred to as “forward-looking projects”, with two subtypes:
 - a. Alliances:
 - Knowledge alliances (as to date)
 - Alliances for sectoral cooperation
 - b. “Forward-looking projects”
 - Forward-looking initiatives with the aim of developing and testing innovative measures
3. Partnerships for excellence: European universities and Erasmus Mundus full-study scholarships for master’s students (worldwide)

2.1.6 Cooperation projects: Erasmus+ and the Swiss programme for Erasmus+

The following table provides information on the current and future programme offers of Erasmus+ in comparison with the offers that were funded under the Swiss Erasmus+ programme between 2014 and 2020. The Erasmus+ instruments are strategically structured and coordinated. While cooperations can be entered into for individual projects, alliances are designed for the longer term. The European universities form an in-depth cooperation across numerous departments including synergies between research and education as partnerships for excellence.

2 <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/9369267b-7ae2-11e9-9f05-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-search>

Cooperation to promote innovation and exchange good practice

	Erasmus + 2014-20/ expected for 2021-27 Key Action 2	Swiss Programme to Erasmus+ 2014-20
Excellence	European universities	No offer
	Erasmus Mundus Joint Master: full scholarships for the best master's students worldwide ³	No offer
Innovation	Pioneering initiatives / “forward-looking projects”	No offer
	Knowledge alliances and sectoral alliances	Partial replacement for knowledge alliances: The whole project is financed by EU funds with the exception of the CH participation, which is supported with CH funds. The activities of CH partners are strongly limited.
Cooperation	Cooperation projects (former strategic partnerships)	Partial replacement for knowledge alliances: The whole project is financed by EU funds with the exception of the CH participation, which is supported with CH funds. The activities of CH partners are strongly limited.

Figure 3: Key Action 2 offers compared: Erasmus+ and Swiss Programme for Erasmus+

How easily organisations in Erasmus+ countries can cooperate in projects with organisations in non-associated countries (also referred to as third countries, such as Switzerland) is particularly relevant. It seems clear, given the last two calls for projects and the more restrictive approach towards partner countries such as Switzerland and the United Kingdom, that the prestigious partnerships for excellence (e.g. European Universities) are not open to institutions from partner countries. The extent to which a harmonisation of the conditions of participation will allow third countries to participate at all and in what form remains open. A more restrictive approach would result in it no longer being possible to dock onto European projects, even with proprietary funds.

2.1.7 Great potential for more cooperation

A comparison with six European countries illustrates the potential of such cooperation formats for Switzerland as well. The graph shows the number of Erasmus+ strategic partnership type projects funded.

Strategic Partnerships 2014-19

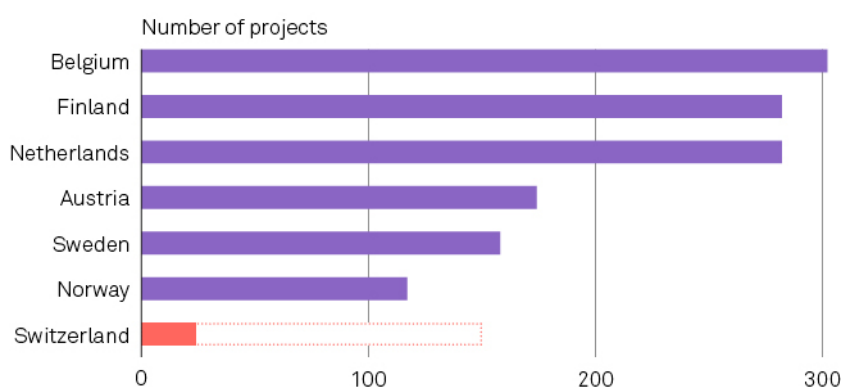


Figure 4: Cooperation potential for Swiss institutions

³ Has been included in the current programme generation under Key Action 1.

Another indicator of the potential of such formats is the number of applications submitted to the International Pilot Programme. Although not part of the Swiss Programme for Erasmus+, this new funding instrument is based on the European model for cooperation projects of the strategic partnership type. In the pilot phase 2018-20 149 project proposals were submitted to Movetia for worldwide cooperation projects at higher education level.

3 Review of the Swiss Programme for Erasmus+ for higher education

The Swiss Programme for Erasmus+ was launched in 2014, mainly to replace the mobility activities of the Erasmus+ Key Action 1 and to maintain mobility to and from Europe.

The resulting mobility programme of the Swiss Programme for Erasmus+ for higher education is called **Swiss-European Mobility Programme (SEMP)**. SEMP offers Swiss universities and colleges of higher education the opportunity to support students, lecturers and staff for stays abroad in one of the 34 European Erasmus+ Programme Countries (outgoing mobility). If students or university staff come to Switzerland from one of these countries, they are also supported by SEMP as 'incomings'. This practice ensures reciprocal exchange between institutions at higher education level and is necessary in order to be a Partner Country for exchanges with European Erasmus+ Programme Countries (see section 2.1.3). In the 2018/19 academic year, outgoing mobility was supported with CHF 10.5 million and incoming mobility with CHF 9.2 million.

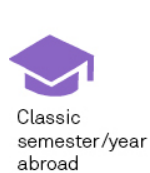
In addition, the Swiss Programme for Erasmus+ has created the possibility for Swiss institutions to participate in European cooperation projects (exclusively for strategic partnerships and knowledge alliances). For the other Erasmus+ offers (as described in section 2.1.6), there is no alternative or compensation.

The Swiss Programme for Erasmus+ was launched in 2014 from the urgency of non-association to maintain mainly (student) mobility to and from Europe.

3.1 Swiss-European Mobility Programme (SEMP)

Since 2014, a total of four types of mobility have been supported by the SEMP: two for students and two for higher education institution staff. Students can acquire credits at partner institutions abroad by studying there for a semester or a year or by completing an internship of at least two months at a public organisation or private company. Lecturers have the opportunity to teach at a partner institution and all higher education institution staff can take specialist further training courses. Financial support is provided for travel and the costs of the stay.

Student Mobility for Studies



Staff Mobility for Teaching



Student Mobility for Traineeships



Staff Mobility for Training



* Average data on outgoing mobility call 2017

** Details on the anticipated ECTS come from 16 of 38 SEMP institutions

Figure 5: SEMP supports four types of mobility: two for students and two for higher education institution staff

SEMP is open to all educational institutions at tertiary level. Twelve Universities, eight Universities of Applied Sciences, 13 Universities of Teacher Education, four colleges of higher education colleges and five accredited institutions are currently taking part in the programme.

3.1.1 Trends in SEMP mobility

The development of higher education mobility since 2011 was recently analysed by Movetia. The analysis showed:

- The continuity of Swiss mobility within Europe was guaranteed after 2014, but the end of the association with Erasmus+ has had an impact on Swiss mobility figures: growth has slowed, and in some areas the figures have slumped. Universities of Applied Sciences and of Teacher Education have been hit the hardest. For example, the Universities of Applied Sciences only made up for the slump (due to non-association) in student mobility of 2014 after two academic years. And also in the academic year 2018/19 the mobility figures of the Universities of Applied Sciences are declining: -7% for student mobility (outgoing and incoming).
- A growing number of partner agreements is needed between Swiss and European higher education institutions and programme maintenance is complex for Swiss institutions, which has had an effect on mobility trends since 2014. Mobility levels per agreement have stayed the same or fallen.

For a detailed analysis of mobility development by type of institution, please refer to the publication [Mobility Monitoring – Facts & Figures on Swiss Higher Education Mobility](#) from Movetia. The latest mobility figures can be found in the [SEMP Statistics 2018/19](#).

The modest development of the mobility figures of Swiss SEMP institutions is influenced by the current non-association. In particular, this has to do with the loss of visibility of Swiss institutions and can be explained as follows:

- Within Erasmus+, all outgoing mobility is linked to organisational support funds OS to cover the costs incurred by universities in mobility managing and promoting. However, European universities receive no funding for mobility to and from Switzerland. Cooperation with Switzerland has been based on good will since 2014.

- Mobility to and from Switzerland is invisible: mobility to or from Switzerland is not included in EU statistics, which means that these mobilities are not included in the calculation of the Past Performance (PP). The PP is decisive for the allocation of funds at EU level: the higher the PP, the higher the budget for the next year.

Europe cooperates with Switzerland, but only with the “hand brake on”.

Conclusion: although European universities would like to cooperate with Switzerland – not least because of its excellent education system – they do so only with the “handbrake on”. The administrative effort has an associated additional loop and the financial incentives are non-existent. This attitude is confirmed by the very slow growth or in fact stagnation in outgoing mobility and the decline in incoming mobility. This is also indicated by the increasing number of necessary partner agreements for the same number of or indeed fewer mobilities. The digitisation of Erasmus+ will further increase the marginalisation of Switzerland in the future.

3.1.2 Austria realises 26% more mobility activities as part of Erasmus+

The potential for more mobility is not exploited with SEMP, as illustrated in section 2.1.4. But what is the situation in comparison with the rest of Europe?

The best way to illustrate the relation between Swiss and European student mobility is to compare Switzerland with a similar country. In terms of its education system, graduate population and the ratio of European to global mobility, Austria is a suitable candidate. Switzerland and Austria are also similar in terms of the percentage of students who complete their entire degrees abroad: 4.1% for Switzerland and 5% for Austria. And the ratio between European mobility through Erasmus+ and other programmes (e.g. SEMP) is also exactly the same for both countries at 58% and 42% respectively.

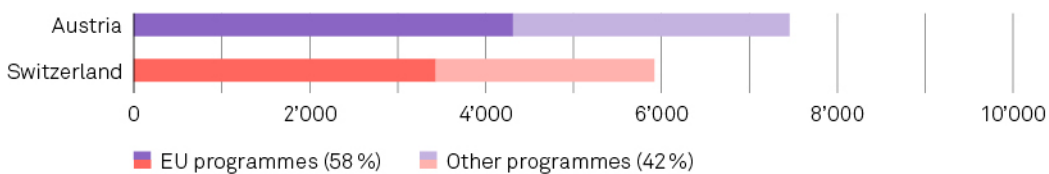
In 2016, Switzerland had slightly more graduates at tertiary level than Austria.

In absolute figures, graduates of Austrian institutions realised 4,320 mobility stays in Europe, which is nearly 900 mobility stays or 26% more than Swiss graduates.

Number of graduates 2016



Number of mobile graduates 2016



Source: Eurostat, according to ISCED 5–8 (as at 27.10.2019)

Abbildung 6: Die Schweiz und Österreich im Vergleich: Anzahl mobile Absolvent/innen

3.2 Cooperation projects – benefits, facts, figures

If a Swiss institution wants to initiate a cooperation project, it cannot be funded through the Swiss Erasmus+ programme and is dependent on cooperation with European partner institutions. Official participation of partner countries (third countries) in cooperation projects is possible in some cases. In the current Erasmus+ programme generation, Swiss institutions can participate within the framework of strategic partnerships (SP) and knowledge alliances (KA). On the other hand, however, access to other cooperation offers such as the Initiative for European Universities is closed to Swiss universities (see table 2, section 3.1.5).

The participation in certain offers depends on the classification in a certain region (see section 3) and is certainly subject to restrictions (no management function and limited activities possible). When non-associated countries participate in Erasmus+ activities, the European Commission always weighs up different needs: on the one hand the need for “borderless” cooperation, but also the desire that countries that do not pay in do not benefit too much from offers financed by others. This means that the participation of partner countries must represent added value for the cooperation as a whole and that certain activities are restricted for them.⁴

Parallel to this official participation option, the Swiss Programme for Erasmus+ finances what is referred to as the “associated” path as a “silent partner”.⁵ Only the Swiss institution involved in a European project will receive financial support. No funds flow into the overall project and the Swiss project contribution usually remains invisible.

Finally: The current solution for the participation of Swiss institutions in Erasmus+ cooperation formats is complicated, costly and difficult to implement, particularly in terms of communication with foreign partners.

The hurdles for Swiss institutions to participate in such collaborations at all are summarised in this European evaluation in an exemplary manner: «[the Swiss partner] does not provide convincing evidence of added value to the project. Good previous collaboration, high quality in research outputs and its social impact are not enough to understand the need for the partner from Switzerland. The role of [Swiss institution] in different outputs and activities needs more explanation showing its uniqueness in Europe. [...] The proposal does not provide convincing evidence of such added value and must be rejected as a consequence».

The project application was rejected in its entirety due to Swiss participation.

3.2.1 Strategic partnerships: a specific example

The project “Cooperative Online Peer-assisted Learning in Occupational Therapy” COPILOT (start: Nov 2018/conclusion: April 2021) provides an example of how the Erasmus+ strategic partnership funding measure enables cross-border cooperation between higher education institutions from the European area.

Under the direction of the Austrian Joanneum University of Applied Sciences and with Swiss participation through the ZHAW (in associated mode), COPILOT aims to promote international networking and intercultural skills at university level in the occupational therapy course, especially for students who, for various reasons, are unable to spend a semester or internship abroad. The cooperation was initiated by seven international partner institutions and is based on several years of experience in the development and implementation of international e-learning modules. In the COPILOT

For Switzerland, participation in cooperation projects with partner country status means: no project management, restrictions in the funded activities and a risk for the European partners.

⁴ Official participation under Erasmus+ (example of strategic partnerships): when Swiss institutions participate as official partners in a strategic partnership under Erasmus+, all partner institutions (including Swiss partners) receive support from European funds. Such an approach requires a strict justification in the European proposal of the added value of Swiss participation, demonstrating that no other partner from a programme country could make the same contribution. Not only are Swiss institutions excluded from project management, but their participation with partner country status also entails risks for the other partners: a candidature is rejected as a whole if the evaluators are not convinced of the added value that the participation of the Swiss institutions will bring to the project. And even after a selection, Swiss institutions are subject to restrictions: not all actions are funded (e.g. no funding for mobility between partner countries or for additional costs, etc.).

⁵ Associated participation in the Swiss Programme for Erasmus+ (e.g. strategic partnerships): Swiss institutions can also participate as associated partners in a cooperation project under Erasmus+. The project is managed by a foreign partner institution. The latter submits the Erasmus+ application for the funding of the strategic partnership to the relevant national agency in its country. The institution based in Switzerland submits a separate application to Movetia. Swiss participation in a strategic partnership under Erasmus+ can only be supported if the project is approved for funding at European level.

project, a pool of innovative, easily realisable and flexible online learning offers is developed for students of occupational therapy. These can be integrated into existing curricula with very little effort.⁶

3.2.2 Austria with significantly more cooperation projects under Erasmus+

The balance for Switzerland is sobering, the gap to Europe is significant and the potential has not been fully exploited. This is illustrated by Austrian participation figures.

The chart shows the number of strategic partnerships funded since 2014. For Swiss institutions, a distinction is made between participation as an official partner under Erasmus+ and participation as an associated partner through the Swiss Programme for Erasmus+. The number of funded projects with the participation of Austrian institutions is used as a comparison:

The balance for Switzerland is sobering, the gap to Europe is significant and the potential has not been fully exploited.

Strategic Partnerships

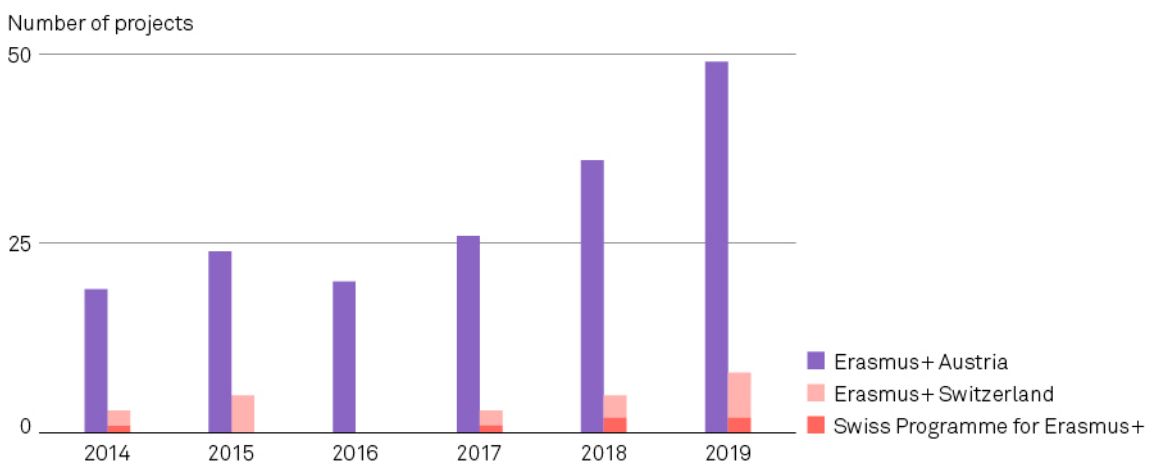


Figure 7: Switzerland and Austria compared: number of supported strategic partnerships

Not only the Austrian figures confirm the potential of such formats, but also the number of applications for strategic partnerships submitted by Swiss institutions to participate in such project formats. Despite the difficult conditions, 106 applications have been submitted since 2014.

⁶ For more details of the project (in German): <https://www.zhaw.ch/de/gesundheit/institute-zentren/ier/alle-news/news-detailansicht/event-news/projekt-copilot-interkultureller-austausch-von-zu-hause-aus/>

4 Conclusion

The European Erasmus+ programme is a central funding instrument for cooperation in the European Higher Education Area: it increases the quality of teaching and research and improves the chances of university graduates entering the working world. In future, even more funds are to be invested at European level in education cooperation 2021-27 (as at 10/06/20: EUR 24 billion).

Since 2014, Switzerland has no longer been associated with Erasmus+. The comparison of Erasmus+ 2014-20 with the Swiss Erasmus+ programme has shown that although individual measures in the area of mobility can be compensated for in the short term, there is no substitute for the strategic programme offers of Erasmus+, which significantly limits the networking and competitive opportunities of Swiss universities. As a result, the potential for more mobility and institutional cooperation is not being fully exploited.

Movetia is convinced that the association of Switzerland to the Erasmus+ education programme is preferable to a future Swiss solution for the further development and quality assurance of the entire Swiss education area and for the fulfilment of the national strategy for exchange and mobility of the Confederation and the cantons (2017).

It is important that Swiss institutions can play an active role in shaping the European Higher Education Area.