

ERASMUS AND INTERNATIONAL CREDIT MOBILITY IN A CONTRIBUTION TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS ASSOCIATED WITH QUALITY EDUCATION AND REDUCING INEQUALITIES

Margarida Saraiva^{1*}, Teresa Nogueiro², Fátima Jorge³, Elisa Chaleta⁴

¹Prof., Management Department, School of Social Sciences, Universidade de Évora and Researcher at BRU-Business Research Unit / Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, PORTUGAL, msaraiva@uevora.pt

²Dr., PhD student in Business Management at the University of Évora, PORTUGAL, t.nogueiro@gmail.com

³Prof., Management Department, School of Social Sciences, Universidade de Évora and Researcher at CICIP - Research Center in Political Science, PORTUGAL, mfi@uevora.pt

⁴Prof., Department of Psychology, School of Social Sciences, Universidade de Évora and Researcher at CIEP- Center for Research in Education and Psychology, PORTUGAL, mec@uevora.pt

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

In Europe, and promoted by the European Commission, the Erasmus+ programme has been providing institutions, through various actions, with mobility and exchanges of students, teaching and non-teaching staff both within and outside Europe. In order to increase the qualitative impact of its actions and to ensure equal opportunities, the programme aims to make it easier to reach more people of all ages and from other cultures, and from diverse social and economic backgrounds. Considering the importance that this programme currently has at global level and its objectives being aligned with the 2030 agenda and given the fundamental characteristics and objectives of the programme and the mobility projects, it became relevant to analyse the contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals associated with quality education (SDG 4) and the reduction of inequalities (SDG 10). The research methodology used the analysis of the programme and Key Action 1 individual mobility for learning purposes objectives' and more specifically those related to mobilities of higher education participants under the International Credit Mobility (ICM) in the period 2014-2020, crossing them with those of the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 10. The questionnaires applied to the participants in this action were also analysed and was possible to check the prevalence of SDGs 4 and 10. It was found during the study that Erasmus, and mobility projects, strongly contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals of quality education and reducing inequalities, but that there are also other SDGs to which Erasmus can contribute and are certainly worth evaluating.

Keywords: Erasmus+, Higher Education Institutions, International Credit Mobility, Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 4, SDG 10.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEI) are becoming increasingly concerned with the conceptual issues surrounding the practice of promoting sustainable development. In the context of an urgent need for them to develop in a sustainable manner, this role is both inevitable and vital (Brandli, Frandoloso, Tauchen, Vieira & Pereira, 2010). In 1990, 22 university delegates presented ten-point action plan for higher education institutions to contribute to a more sustainable future at an international meeting in Taillores, France (Chaleta, Saraiva, Leal, Fialho & Borralho, 2021; Talloires Declaration, 1990).

In Report and Declaration of the Presidents Conference (1990: 1):

“Universities educate most of the people who develop and manage society’s institutions. For this reason, universities bear profound responsibilities to increase the awareness, knowledge, technologies, and tools to create an environmentally sustainable future. Universities have all the expertise necessary to develop the intellectual and conceptual framework to achieve this goal. Universities must play a strong role in the education, research, policy development, information exchange, and community outreach to help create an equitable and sustainable future”.

The Sustainable Development Goals define global priorities and aspirations for 2030 and require worldwide action by governments, organisations and civil society to eradicate poverty and create a life of dignity and opportunity for all, within the limits of the planet. Higher education is expected to contribute knowledge and innovation to meet societal, economic, and environmental challenges through the training of both academic staff and students, and universities are challenged to include the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in a wide range of their training offerings (Chaleta *et al.*, 2021). With this paper we want to answer to what role can the Erasmus+ programme and the ICM/ key action for mobility of individuals play in achieving sustainable development goals relating to quality education and reducing inequalities. The paper presents 4 more sections dedicated to Higher Education and Sustainable Development, Sustainable Development Goals Associated with Quality Education and Reducing Inequalities, The Erasmus+ Programme and the International Credit Mobility Action and The Erasmus+ programme and ICM vs The SDGs 4 and 10: Results and Conclusions, respectively.

2 HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

For higher education institutions (HEI) there are criteria such as internationalisation, which often dictate their ability to attract more and better students. Thus, it is common for these institutions to take into consideration in their institutional internationalisation strategies the mobility of students, teaching and non-teaching staff. The need is felt to better prepare citizens with the knowledge, skills and competences needed in a society with a dynamic evolution, increasingly mobile, multicultural, green, digital and sustainable.

The Bologna Declaration, dated 1999, creates the European Higher Education Area (Damião, 2015; Lourtie, 2002), which emerged after the signing of the Magna Charta Universitatum in 1988, stating that the future of Europe would depend to a large extent on the cultural, scientific, and technical development that higher education offered. According to the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning (Parlamento Europeu e Conselho, 2006: 13), "education in its dual function - social and economic - has an essential role to play in ensuring that European citizens acquire the necessary key competences to enable them to adapt flexibly to these changes" in which each citizen will have to have key competences extended to adapt flexibly to a rapidly changing and highly interconnected world.

Higher Education is increasingly a competitive area that strives for excellence, but at the same time seeks to respond to the needs of society and the labour market. HEIs are typically connected to the usual stakeholders, such as students, educators, staff, classes, and financial organisations. However, social effects also require universities to collaborate with different types of communities or work with companies (Ali, Mustapha, Osman & Hassan, 2020).

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a fundamental role, as they are thought and opinion makers, being able to potentiate the creation and dissemination of a sustainable thought. It is therefore necessary that those involved in the development of university activities serve as a basis for the dissemination of knowledge and strengthening of sustainable practices. Although there have been some developments in higher education with regard to sustainable development, there are still numerous challenges to overcome (Leal Filho, Manolas & Pace, 2015). HEIs are bodies of great importance in the development of society, as one of the main agents transforming professionals who will dictate the directions of the market and society. Like any organization, HEIs use a large number of available resources (inputs), consequence of the large flow of people, information and activities developed and release results (outputs). These institutions end up having a large environmental liability, having the need to incorporate sustainable development practices into their

activities (Gazzoni, Scherer, Hahn, de Moura Carpes & dos Santos, 2018). According to Fouto (2002), HEIs present four levels of intervention with society, namely the education of decision makers for a sustainable future; the research of solutions, paradigms and values that serve a sustainable society; the operation of university campuses as models and practical examples of sustainability on a local scale; and, finally, the coordination and communication between the previous levels and between these and society.

The promotion of sustainability in the context of higher education institutions can be achieved through teaching and research, among other factors (Evangelinos, Jones & Panoriou, 2009; Gazzoni *et al.*, 2018). According to Brandli *et al.* (2010), the rigid bureaucratic and hierarchical system, the lack of awareness and commitment of the agents involved (teachers, students, and administration), and the lack of definition of short and long-term institutional policies all constrain the implementation of sustainable practices at HEIs.

3 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS ASSOCIATED WITH QUALITY EDUCATION AND REDUCING INEQUALITIES

The Sustainable Development Goals define global priorities and aspirations for 2030 and require worldwide action by governments, organisations and civil society to eradicate poverty and create a life of dignity and opportunity for all, within the limits of the planet. All UN Member States approved the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, which provide a shared framework for peace and prosperity for people and the planet today and in the future.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) lie at the heart of it, and they constitute an urgent call to action for all countries – developed and developing – to work together in a global partnership. They understand that eradicating poverty and other forms of deprivation must be combined with efforts to enhance health and education, decrease inequality, and boost economic growth – all while combating climate change and protecting the oceans and forests. The 17 Goals are all interconnected, and it is critical to achieve them all by 2030 to ensure that no one is left behind. Higher education is expected to contribute knowledge and innovation to meet societal, economic, and environmental challenges through the training of both academic staff and students, and universities are challenged to include the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in a wide range of their training offerings (Chaleta *et al.*, 2021).

This work is focused on SDG 4 quality education and SDG 10 reducing inequalities associated to the Erasmus+ programme and the international credit mobility action.


3.1 SDG 4 - Quality Education: A Brief Approach

Goal 4 (Quality Education) recognizes the importance of education for long-term development, and some of the Goal's goals explicitly call for higher education institutions to take action, given their direct relevance in teaching and learning activities, knowledge production, and skill development to meet the challenges of today's and tomorrow's worlds (Leicht, Heiss & Byun, 2018).

SDG 4 focuses on inclusive, egalitarian, high-quality, and lifelong learning. SDG 4 is a vital essential to the fulfilment of all of the other Goals, despite being prioritized as one of the 17 Goals. Of course, this Goal can be implemented in both formal and non-formal education, and at all levels of education; nonetheless, HEIs play a unique role in its implementation and realization (Ferguson & Roofe, 2020). According to UNESCO, UNPFA, UNICEF & UN (2015) the targets, the means of action and indicators are as presented on Table 1:

Table 1 – Targets, means of action and indicators for SDG4

Targets/goals	Indicators	Means of action	Indicators
4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes	Proportion of children and young people: (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex	4.a Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all;	4.a.1 Proportion of schools with access to: (a) electricity; (b) the Internet for pedagogical purposes; (c) computers for pedagogical purposes; (d) adapted infrastructure and materials for students with disabilities; (e) basic drinking water; (f) single-sex basic sanitation facilities; and (g) basic handwashing facilities (as per the WASH indicator definitions)

<p>4.2 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education</p>	<p>4.2.1 Proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex 4.2.2 Participation rate in organized learning (one year before the official primary entry age), by sex</p>	<p>4.b By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries</p>	<p>4.b.1 Volume of official development assistance flows for scholarships by sector and type of study</p>
<p>4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university</p>	<p>4.3.1 Participation rate of youth and adults in formal and non-formal education and training in the previous 12 months, by sex</p>	<p>4.c By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States.</p>	<p>4.c.1 Proportion of teachers in: (a) pre-primary; (b) primary; (c) lower secondary; and (d) upper secondary education who have received at least the minimum organized teacher training (e.g. pedagogical training) pre-service or in-service required for teaching at the relevant level in a given country</p>
<p>4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship</p>	<p>4.4.1 Proportion of youth and adults with information and communications technology (ICT) skills, by type of skill</p>		
<p>4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations</p>	<p>4.5.1 Parity indices (female/male, rural/urban, bottom/top wealth quintile and others such as disability status, indigenous peoples and conflict-affected, as data become</p>		


	available) for all education indicators on this list that can be disaggregated	
4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy	4.6.1 Percentage of population in a given age group achieving at least a fixed level of proficiency in functional (a) literacy and (b) numeracy skills, by sex	
4.7 By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development	4.7.1 Extent to which (i) global citizenship education and (ii) education for sustainable development, including gender equality and human rights, are mainstreamed at all levels in: (a) national education policies, (b) curricula, (c) teacher education and (d) student assessment	


Source: Own elaboration according to UNESCO, UNPFA, UNICEF & UN (2015)

3.2 SDG 10 – Reducing Inequalities, a Brief Approach

The Sustainable Development Goals include reducing inequities and ensuring that no one is left behind. Inequality within and between countries has long been a source of concern. Despite some encouraging signals toward lowering inequality in some areas, such as decreasing relative income disparity in some nations and providing lower-income countries with preferred trading status, inequality persists. Concerning SDG 10 the UN states: “The intercountryal community has made significant strides towards lifting people out of poverty. The most vulnerable countrys—the least developed countries, the landlocked developing countries and the small island developing states— continue to make inroads into poverty reduction. However, inequality still persists, and large disparities remain in access to health and education services and other assets” (UN). SDG 10 comprises ten targets and eleven indicators, according to the United Nations. Indicators provide the metrics through which the world aims to track whether these Targets are met, whereas Targets outline the ambitions. Based on United Nations information, SDG tracker (2018) and on Szymańska (2021), Table 2 presents the goals and indicators for SDG10.

Table 2 – Targets, means of action and indicators for SDG10

Targets/goals	Indicators	Means of action	Indicators
10.1 By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average	10.1.1 Growth rates of household expenditure or income per capita among the bottom 40 per cent of the population and the total population	10.A Implement the principle of special and differential treatment for developing countries, in particular least developed countries, in accordance with World Trade Organization agreements	10.a.1 Proportion of tariff lines applied to imports from least developed countries and developing countries with zero-tariff
10.2 By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status	10.2.1 Proportion of people living below 50 per cent of median income, by sex, age and persons with disabilities	10.B Encourage official development assistance and financial flows, including foreign direct investment, to States where the need is greatest, in particular least developed countries, African countries, small island developing States and landlocked developing countries, in accordance with their national plans and programmes	10.b.1 Total resource flows for development, by recipient and donor countries and type of flow (e.g., official development assistance, foreign direct investment and other flows)
10.3 Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard	10.3.1 Proportion of population reporting having personally felt discriminated against or harassed in the previous 12 months on the basis of a ground of discrimination prohibited under international human rights law	10.C By 2030, reduce to less than 3 per cent the transaction costs of migrant remittances and eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5 per cent	10.c.1 Remittance costs as a proportion of the amount remitted
10.4 Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality	10.4.1 Labor share of GDP, comprising wages and social protection transfers		
10.5 Improve the regulation and monitoring of global financial markets and institutions and strengthen the implementation of such regulations	10.5.1 Financial Soundness Indicators		
10.6 Ensure enhanced representation and voice for developing	10.6.1 Proportion of members and voting rights of developing		

<p>countries in decision-making in global international economic and financial institutions in order to deliver more effective, credible, accountable and legitimate institutions</p>	<p>countries in international organizations</p>	
<p>10.7 Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies</p>	<p>10.7.1 Recruitment cost borne by employee as a proportion of monthly income earned in country of destination. 10.7.2. Number of countries that have implemented well-managed migration policies</p> <p>10.7.3 Number of people who died or disappeared in the process of migration towards an international destination.</p> <p>10.7.4 Proportion of the population who are refugees, by country of origin.</p>	

Source: Own elaboration according to SDG Tracker (2018) and Szymańska (2021)

The significance of the target stems from the fact that huge gaps have a detrimental impact on sustainable development and stymie progress toward the other SDGs. The latter conclusion was reached as a result of the fact that progress toward one objective has an impact on the results of other goals. The 2030 Agenda expresses the interconnected nature of SDGs in this framework (United Nations, 2016). Furthermore, large-scale inequalities stifle social cohesion and limit equal access to education and health care, as well as negatively affect social inclusion (Szymańska, 2021).

4 THE ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME AND THE INTERNATIONAL CREDIT MOBILITY ACTION

The Erasmus+ Programme builds on the achievements of more than 25 years of European education, training, and youth programming, and encompasses both intra-European and international cooperation. Erasmus+ is the consequence of the Commission's merging of various prior European programmes undertaken between 2007 and 2013. Erasmus+ aims to go beyond these programmes by promoting synergies and cross-fertilization across various fields of education, training, and youth, removing artificial barriers between Actions and project formats, fostering new ideas, attracting new actors from the labour market and civil society, and stimulating new forms of cooperation.

As a general objective the Erasmus programme intends to contribute, in general, to the achievement of the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET, 2020), of developing the European dimension in sport and the overall objectives of the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field. It will also contribute to the sustainable development of Partner Countries in the field of higher education and the promotion of European values in accordance with Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union. As important features of the Erasmus+ programme, the European Commission presents among others the international dimension, multilingualism and equity and inclusion.

In order to achieve its objectives, the Erasmus+ Programme implements several key actions but for the

purpose of this work the focus was the key action 1 – mobility of individuals that supports the mobility of staff and learners, Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees and Erasmus+ Master Loans. Mobility projects aim to: support learners in the acquisition of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) with a view to improving their personal development, their involvement as considerate and active citizens in society and their employability in the European labour market and beyond; support the professional development of those who work in education, training and youth with a view to innovating and improving the quality of teaching, training and youth work across Europe; enhance notably the participants' foreign languages competence; raise participants' awareness and understanding of other cultures and countries, offering them the opportunity to build networks of international contacts, to actively participate in society and develop a sense of European citizenship and identity; increase the capacities, attractiveness and international dimension of organisations active in the education, training and youth fields so that they are able to offer activities and programmes that better respond to the needs of individuals, within and outside Europe; reinforce synergies and transitions between formal, non-formal education, vocational training, employment and entrepreneurship; and, ensure a better recognition of competences gained through the learning periods abroad.

This Action also supports international mobility efforts in the domains of higher education and youth from or to Partner Countries. This activity also contributes to EU-eligible Partner Country collaboration and reflects the EU's external action goals, priorities, and principles such as enhancing the attractiveness of higher education in Europe and assisting European higher education institutions in competing on the global higher education market; promoting the priorities identified in the "New European Consensus on Development" and the "European Higher Education in the World" Communication; promoting the internationalisation, attractiveness, equity of access, and modernisation of higher education institutions outside Europe in order to promote the internationalization, attractiveness, quality, equity of access, and modernisation of higher education institutions outside Europe.

Least developed countries, as well as disadvantaged students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students with special needs, will receive special attention; enhance non-formal learning and youth collaboration with Partner Countries. The international credit mobility is a mobility project for higher education students and staff. The eligible countries are divided in different regions of the world in 12 budgetary envelopes and the size of each budgetary envelope is different. These projects are assessed on the basis of several criteria such as relevance of the strategy for HEIs, quality of the cooperation arrangements, quality of the activity design and implementation and impact and dissemination (Erasmus+ Programme Guide, 2019).

As this work progressed it was intuitive to realise that any activity or decision making has an impact that can be more specific at the level of the individual or of a region or broader at the level of society or the world, it can have a minor impact or a significant impact, depending on the context in which it takes place. What role can the Erasmus+ programme and the ICM/ key action for mobility of individuals play in achieving sustainable development goals relating to quality education and reducing inequalities? The programmes' and action's goals were examined before being compared to SDGs 4 and 10. The result of this analysis is presented below, based on the Consolidation version of the Treaty on European (2012), Erasmus+ Programme Guide, Version 2 (2019), SDG-Tracker.org, website (2018) and UNESCO, UNPFA, UNICEF & UN (2015),

4.1. Erasmus+ Programme goals and main features plus in the field of education and training

The Erasmus+ Programme shall contribute to the achievement of: 1) the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, including the headline education target; 2) the objectives of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET, 2020), including the corresponding benchmarks; 3) the sustainable development of Partner Countries in the field of higher education; 4) the overall objectives of the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field; 5) the objective of developing the European dimension in sport, in particular grassroots sport, in line with the EU work plan for sport; 6) the promotion of European values in accordance with Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union.

Important Features: 1) Recognition and validation of skills and qualifications; 2) Dissemination and exploitation of project results; 3) ERASMUS+ open access requirement for educational materials; 4) ERASMUS+ open access for research and data; 5) International dimension; 6) Multilingualism; 7) Equity and inclusion; 8) Protection and safety of participants

Specific objectives pursued by the Erasmus+ Programme in the field of education and training are to: 1) improve the level of key competences and skills, with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market and their contribution to a cohesive society, in particular through increased opportunities for learning

mobility and through strengthened cooperation between the world of education and training and the world of work; 2) foster quality improvements, innovation excellence and internationalisation at the level of education and training institutions, in particular through enhanced transnational cooperation between education and training providers and other stakeholders; 3) promote the emergence and raise awareness of a European lifelong learning area designed to complement policy reforms at national level and to support the modernisation of education and training systems, in particular through enhanced policy cooperation, better use of EU transparency and recognition tools and the dissemination of good practices; 4) enhance the international dimension of education and training, in particular through cooperation between Programme and Partner-Country institutions in the field of VET and in higher education, by increasing the attractiveness of European higher education institutions and supporting the EU's external action, including its development objectives, through the promotion of mobility and cooperation between Programme and Partner-Country higher education institutions and targeted capacity building in Partner Countries; 5) improve the teaching and learning of languages and promote the EU's broad linguistic diversity and intercultural awareness.

4.2. Mobility projects/ICM Goals

Aims of a mobility project: a) support learners in the acquisition of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) with a view to improving their personal development, their involvement as considerate and active citizens in society and their employability in the European labour market and beyond; b) support the professional development of those who work in education, training and youth with a view to innovating and improving the quality of teaching, training and youth work across Europe; c) enhance notably the participants' foreign languages competence; d) raise participants' awareness and understanding of other cultures and countries, offering them the opportunity to build networks of international contacts, to actively participate in society and develop a sense of European citizenship and identity; e) increase the capacities, attractiveness and international dimension of organisations active in the education, training and youth fields so that they are able to offer activities and programmes that better respond to the needs of individuals, within and outside Europe; f) reinforce synergies and transitions between formal, non-formal education, vocational training, employment and entrepreneurship; and, ensure a better recognition of competences gained through the learning periods abroad.

This action also contributes to cooperation between the EU-eligible Partner Country collaboration and reflects the EU's external action goals, priorities, and principles such as: a) enhance the attractiveness of higher education in Europe and support European higher education institutions in competing on the higher education market worldwide; b) support the priorities identified in the "New European Consensus on Development" and the "European Higher Education in the World" Communication; c) support the internationalisation, attractiveness quality, equity of access and modernisation of higher education institutions outside Europe in view of promoting the development of Partner Countries; d) promote the development and external policy objectives and principles including national ownership, social cohesion, equity, proper geographical balance and diversity. Special attention will be given to the least developed countries as well as to disadvantaged students from poor socio-economic backgrounds and to students will special needs; e) promote non-formal learning and cooperation in the field of youth with Partner Countries.

For students, trainees, apprentices and young people, the mobility activities are meant to produce the following outcomes: a) improved learning performance; b) enhanced employability and improved career prospects; c) increased sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; d) increased self-empowerment and self-esteem; e) improved foreign language competences; f) enhanced intercultural awareness; g) more active participation in society; h) better awareness of the European project and the EU values; i) increased motivation for taking part in future (formal/non-formal) education or training after the mobility period abroad.

For youth workers and professionals involved in education, training and youth, the mobility activities are expected to produce the following outcomes: a) improved competences, linked to their professional profiles (teaching, training, youth work, etc.); b) broader understanding of practices, policies and systems in education, training or youth work across countries; c) increased capacity to trigger changes in terms of modernisation and international opening within their educational organisations; d) greater understanding of interconnections between formal and non-formal education, vocational training and the labour market respectively; e) better quality of their work and activities in favour of students, trainees, apprentices, pupils, adult learners, young people and volunteers; f) greater understanding and responsiveness to social, linguistic and cultural diversity; g) increased ability to address the needs of the disadvantaged; h) increased support for and promotion of mobility activities for learners; i) increased opportunities for professional and career development; j) improved foreign language competences; k) increased motivation and satisfaction in their daily work.

5 THE ERASMUS+ PROGRAMME AND THE ICM VS THE SDGS 4 AND 10: RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Analysing the present information on the Erasmus+ programme especially in the field of education and training and mobility projects in higher education and considering the Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 10 and the associated indicators, it appears that it is possible to respond through this opportunity offered by the European Commission, to some of them. The questionnaires applied to the participants in this action were also analysed and was possible to check the prevalence of SDGs 4 and 10. The participants' reports that are presented at the end of each mobility include about 50 questions. Not all questions can be related to SDGs in general, nor specifically to SDGs 4 and 10. Although this is a fact, it is possible to see that there are questions that allow us to somehow verify the importance that a quality education has for the participant and that equality of opportunities associated with the reduction of inequalities is present and felt by them. It is through a programme like Erasmus+ and the ICM action that the direct contribution of people to these SDGs is clearly evidenced.

Thus, we believe that it is possible to respond to the objectives 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.7, 4.b, 4.c and 10.3. In a closer look, although goals 4.3 and 4.4 are covered individually, it is important to note that they are connected.

About the SDG 4 – Quality Education...

Access to higher education is frequently insufficient, particularly in Least Developed Countries (LDCs), resulting in a knowledge gap with major social and economic consequences. As a result, it is critical to remove barriers to skill development and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) beginning at the secondary level, as well as tertiary education, including university, and to provide young people and adults with lifelong learning opportunities. The programme has a specific objective in the field of education and training that intends to “promote the emergence and raise awareness of a European lifelong learning area designed to complement policy reforms at national level and to support the modernisation of education and training systems, in particular through enhanced policy cooperation, better use of EU transparency and recognition tools and the dissemination of good practices”.

Tertiary education and universities have an important role in promoting critical and creative thinking as well as developing and disseminating information for social, cultural, ecological, and economic growth, in addition to teaching job skills. Universities and tertiary education are essential for the education of future scientists, professionals, and leaders. They serve a critical role in the creation of information and the development of analytical and creative capacities that enable solutions to be found for local and global challenges in all domains of sustainable development through their research function. An aim of mobility projects is “support the professional development of those who work in education, training and youth with a view to innovating and improving the quality of teaching, training and youth work across Europe”, which is aligned to what has been previously mentioned.

An important expected outcome that arises from mobility projects for youth workers and professionals involved in education, training and youth, is: “improved competences, linked to their professional profiles (teaching, training, youth work, etc.)”. Another trend is increased staff and learner mobility, as well as a flow of students travelling abroad to further their academic qualifications. As a result, qualification comparability, recognition, and quality assurance have become a rising topic of concern, particularly in countries with weak administrative institutions. At the same time, tertiary education mobility is a benefit and an opportunity that should be capitalized on in order to improve students' competences and global competitiveness. The alignment of these topics with the aims of mobility projects for higher education (ICM included), the expected outcomes for students, trainees, apprentices, young people, youth workers and professionals involved in education, training and youth is a reality.

The following specific objective pursued by the Erasmus+ Programme in the field of education and training is also a contribution to the SDG4: to improve the level of key competences and skills, with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market and their contribution to a cohesive society, in particular through increased opportunities for learning mobility and through strengthened cooperation between the world of education and training and the world of work; Lifelong learning includes TVET and higher education, which includes universities as well as adult learning, education, and training. Promoting lifelong learning demands a sector-wide approach that includes formal, nonformal, and informal learning opportunities for people of all ages, as well as adult learning, education, and training. It is critical to create chances for older people to have equal access to higher education, with a focus on vulnerable and or disadvantages groups.

In the context of constantly changing labour markets, rising unemployment, particularly among young people, ageing labour forces in some countries, migration, and technological improvements, all countries

must increase people's knowledge, skills, and competences for decent work, entrepreneurship, and life. Education and training programmes in many nations are also expected to satisfy the quickly changing demands of young people and adults to upgrade and learn new skills. As a result, it is critical to expand and diversify learning opportunities through a variety of education and training modalities so that all young people and adults, particularly women and girls, can gain essential information, skills, and competences for decent employment and life. The Erasmus+ programme and the mobility projects contribute by supporting "learners in the acquisition of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences) with a view to improving their personal development, their involvement as considerate and active citizens in society and their employability in the European labour market and beyond"; improving "the level of key competences and skills, with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market and their contribution to a cohesive society, in particular through increased opportunities for learning mobility and through strengthened cooperation between the world of education and training and the world of work"; with the expected outcome of "greater understanding of interconnections between formal and non-formal education, vocational training and the labour market respectively".

An important strategy is based on encouraging learners to take flexible learning paths in both formal and informal settings; allow them to accumulate and transfer credits for different levels of achievement; recognize, validate, and accredit prior learning; and create appropriate bridging programmes and career guidance and counselling services. This strategy fits in with one of the main features of the Erasmus+ programme, namely "Recognition and validation of skills and qualifications" and in one of the aims of mobility projects such as "reinforce synergies and transitions between formal, non-formal education, vocational training, employment and entrepreneurship; and, ensure a better recognition of competences gained through the learning periods abroad".

Poverty must remain a top focus, as it remains the single biggest barrier to inclusion at all levels and in all parts of the globe. Many education programmes have found innovative ways to aid families and learners in overcoming financial barriers to education, and many education programmes have found innovative ways to assist families and learners in overcoming financial difficulties to education. Such approaches must be developed and scaled up. From a strategic standpoint, it is critical to ensure that education policies, sector plans, and budgeting uphold the principles of non-discrimination and equality in and through education, as well as to develop and implement targeted urgent strategies for vulnerable and excluded groups, as well as to develop indicators to track progress toward equality.

Ensure that government plans, budgets, curricula, and textbooks, as well as teacher training and supervision, are free of gender stereotypes and promote equality, non-discrimination, and human rights, as well as intercultural education. This statement is corroborated by the Erasmus+ programme, namely in the feature "Equity and inclusion".

Awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity is a way to promote inclusion and understanding for non-discrimination and the mobility projects support that. Education that aids in the development of peaceful and sustainable communities is critical in a worldwide world with unsolved social, political, economic, and environmental concerns. However, such revolutionary ideas are rarely fully integrated into educational systems. It is also critical to prioritize education's role to the realization of human rights, peace, and responsible citizenship from local to global levels, gender equality, sustainable development, and health in SDG4-Education 2030.

One promising strategy is to provide learners of all ages and genders with opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary to develop peaceful, healthy, and sustainable societies throughout their lives. The Erasmus+ programme contribute to the achievement of the promotion of European values in accordance with Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union, namely "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail" which corroborates the 4.7 target.

Scholarship programmes can be quite beneficial in giving chances for young people and adults who might otherwise be unable to continue their education. They also make a significant contribution to the internationalization of tertiary education and research systems, especially in LDCs. They can aid in expanding access to global information and increasing capability for transferring and adapting knowledge and technology to local contexts. Scholarships should be publicly aimed at young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, in keeping with the SDG4-Education 2030 focus on equity, inclusion, and quality.

The strategy to develop joint programmes between universities in the home country and the recipient country to encourage students to return home, as well as other mechanisms to prevent 'brain drain' – the emigration of highly trained people – and promote 'brain gain,' fits the mobility project goals and is aligned with the Erasmus Programme's specific goal. "Enhance the international dimension of education and training, in particular through cooperation between Programme and Partner-Country institutions in the field of VET and in higher education, by increasing the attractiveness of European higher education institutions and supporting the EU's external action, including its development objectives, through the promotion of mobility and cooperation between Programme and Partner- Country higher education institutions and targeted capacity building in Partner Countries".

Teachers and educators must be empowered, appropriately recruited and compensated, motivated, properly qualified, and supported within well-resourced, efficient, and well managed systems in order to ensure quality education. Professional development that supports teachers' personal learning and advancement throughout their careers has been a priority of successful education systems that assure quality and equity. Teachers, with the help of school administrators, government officials, and communities, make a significant contribution to improving student learning outcomes. Teachers are receptive to change and want to learn and progress throughout their careers, according to data. At the same time, they require more time and space to take more initiatives in collaboration with colleagues and school leaders, as well as to take advantage of professional development opportunities. The Erasmus+ programme encourages professional development through new experiences and the establishment of a new network of contacts through mobility programmes.

About the SDG 10 – Reducing Inequalities...

Ensure equal opportunities and end discrimination is a goal under the SDG 10 that can be measured by the elimination of discriminatory practices. This indicator is defined as the proportion of population reporting having personally felt discriminated against or harassed in the previous 12 months on the basis of a ground of discrimination prohibited under international human rights law. As already seen and previously mentioned, the Erasmus+ programme contribute to the achievement of the promotion of European values in accordance with Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union and promotes equality and inclusion. Simultaneously, key-action 1 – Mobility of individuals, promotes "the development and external policy objectives and principles including national ownership, social cohesion, equity, proper geographical balance and diversity. Special attention will be given to the least developed countries as well as to disadvantaged students from poor socio-economic backgrounds and to students with special needs".

From all that has been said, it can be concluded that the Erasmus+ Programme and key-action 1 – mobility of individuals where International Credit Mobility projects are included, clearly contribute to sustainable development goals, namely for quality education and reducing inequalities.

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