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**Assessing the impact of Erasmus+
in Adult Education: empirical evidence,
transformative processes, and comparative
perspectives within the RIA-AE Framework**

Guest editor Vanna Boffo

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Erasmus+ as a policy measure to promote access to transnational mobility*

Francesca Torlone¹, Marco Ceccarelli²

Keywords

Transnational mobility,
Learning exclusion equilibrium,
Accessibility, Potential Erasmus+
participants.

Abstract

This article analyses Erasmus+ (Key Actions 1 and 2) as a policy measure supporting transnational mobility, focusing on its structural accessibility. Accessibility is conceptualised as the measure's capacity to deploy devices converting formal opportunities into actionable possibilities. Drawing on twelve semi-structured interviews conducted in Italy within the RIA-AE research project, the article examines access barriers, delineates the boundaries between actual, potential, and non-participants, and analyses the role played by information, outreach, guidance, preparation, support, and tutoring services. Findings show that participation is highly mediated by organisations and professionals overseeing the mobility lifecycle. Organisations and professionals can contribute to releasing the demand for mobility, reducing barriers and supporting those less proximate to the measure. In the absence of such devices, however, the measure tends to reach mainly individuals and organisations already embedded in educational, associative and project-based networks, thereby risking the reproduction of forms of exclusion from learning, training and cooperation opportunities. The article therefore argues that the inclusive effectiveness of Erasmus+ mobility should be assessed not only in relation to the opportunities offered, but also in terms of the measure's capacity to expand the actual public through accessibility-oriented services and organisational mediations.

1. Introduction and theoretical framework

The transnational mobility promoted by Erasmus+ constitutes one of the main European policy measures supporting mobility for study, training and the development of strategic partnerships in the fields of education and lifelong learning (KA1; KA2). This article proposes to analyse Erasmus+ mobility through the methodological approach of policy measure analysis (Federighi, Horsdal, Knudsen, Nuissl, Sierra Orrantia & Torlone, 2007; Paparella & Savino, 2008), within the framework of the theory of the publics of education and training (De Sanctis, 1974, 1988).

The analysis focuses on the accessibility of the measure, leaving aside its other components³ (Federighi et al., 2007). This is a deliberate analytical choice: the article aims to examine the capacity of Erasmus+ to activate devices that prevent the ex ante exclusion of some of the less advantaged strata of the adult population. From this perspective, access to mobility does not depend only on the availability of European funding, but also on the presence of real conditions that make participation practicable. Among these, particular importance is attached to:

- the availability of organisations and services providing information, support, guidance and territorial outreach;
- the presence of professionals able to perform mediation and support functions, such as managers, teachers, coordinators, Erasmus+ contact persons, project designers and guidance practitioners;
- the definition of accessibility-oriented criteria and procedures.

These dimensions emerge from the interviews carried out in Italy within the framework of the RIA-AE research project between 2024 and 2026, which are discussed in this article.

The underlying hypothesis is that the effectiveness of mobility depends on the capacity of the measure to construct conditions of access, support and recognition that are appropriate to different profiles of adult learners and to the organisations able to reach out to them.

The theoretical framework integrates policy measure analysis with the distinction between the actual participants, the potential participants and the non-participants of mobility, taking the learning exclusion equilibrium as an interpretative category useful for understanding the possible stabilisation of selective forms of access to Erasmus+ opportunities.

The article is organised into five parts. After the introduction and theoretical framework (§1), §2 presents the results of the study of the measure with regard to barriers to access, mobility participants and the services that make this opportunity concretely accessible. This is followed by a critical analysis of the implications of the findings for research on Erasmus+ mobility and on the impact analysis of the measure (§3). §4 illustrates the methodology adopted for the analysis of the interviews. §4.6 provides information on the codes assigned to the excerpts from the empirical material. The article concludes with §5.

2. Empirical findings: access to and participation in Erasmus+ mobility

2.1. Barriers to access to transnational mobility

The analysis of modes of participation in mobility experiences aims to identify the rules and arrangements that define the effective use of the opportunities offered by Erasmus+. To this end, on the basis of twelve interviews carried out in Italy (2024–2026), we analysed the nature of the *barriers* relating to the following dimensions:

- a. the culture of mobility among coordinators and managers of the organisations responsible for the projects;
- b. the presence or absence of preparatory support measures aimed at creating favourable conditions for access by all potential participants;
- c. the definition of internal rules for the selection of participants.

The culture of mobility among managers and coordinators

The barrier connected to the way in which coordinators and managers represent mobility as a recreational experience emerges from the following:

- Project managers regard mobility projects as access to a “*Club Méditerranée*”, a “disruption of normal teaching activities”, a “waste of time” (P12).

“Many organisations sell Erasmus as a matter of tourism, a holiday, where one does not have to do anything. That was the mistake: presenting it in this way. In order to get people to leave, they reassured them that they would not have to do anything; the teacher goes because they spend a week away from their pupils” (P10).

- The quality and management of the project depend on the presence and interaction of different professionals capable of providing educational design and educational management of the mobility experience. All professionals involved in mobility projects funded by the Erasmus+ programme perform at least six fundamental functions. Each of these can be associated with different professional profiles (Table 1).

Table 1 - Functions performed in mobility projects and professionals involved.

Nr	Function performed in the Erasmus+ mobility project	Professionals involved
1	Governance and legitimization	Managers; presidents; directors of organisations implementing the projects
2	Project design and coordination	Erasmus+ coordinators; project managers.
3	Support, information and guidance	Teachers; trainers; Erasmus+ contact persons; tutors; educators; consultants.
4	Intermediation and construction of the demand for mobility	Consultants; consortium leaders; staff of dedicated help desks.
5	Ambassadors and network animators	Members/coordinators of international networks.
6	Administration and reporting	Directors of general and administrative services; administrative offices; administrative staff.

In the best cases, the different types of professionals are required to translate the complexity of the mobility project into organisational and educational practices implemented by the organisations taking part in the project. The success of the mobility project depends on the presence of professionals with these characteristics and on their capacity to reach potential participants. Several interviewees express awareness of the importance of this factor:

"Many people do not access it because of ignorance, mistrust and preconceptions. All it takes is a competent person who takes you by the hand; an expert professional mediator is useful" (P4).

"In schools there has to be someone, either internal or external, otherwise the school institution struggles to approach Erasmus. I work a lot with schools; we introduced Erasmus 14 years ago and then they got started. I continue to help the school Erasmus contact person with outreach" (P7).

"People participate in Erasmus+ mobility if they are aware of its potential and are supported in building their life project. We helped a Romanian participant take part in the mobility and reconcile it with the need to meet family members from whom he had been separated for many years" (P3).

Presence or absence of preparatory support measures

The presence or absence of preparatory support measures aimed at creating favourable conditions for access by all potential participants is considered a key factor in explaining participation and the expression of demand for mobility. Below are the views expressed by some of those involved in the design and management of support measures:

"I have to create the conditions for people to express their demand to take part in mobility: this is inclusion, namely giving everyone the opportunity to participate" (P12).

"For many people, Erasmus is the only opportunity they have to go somewhere and see a different reality; this is why we try to understand the barriers and manage them" (P12).

The culture of mobility among coordinators and managers, together with their capacity and possibility to implement support measures that create favourable conditions, appear to be two factors that affect the capacity of mobility projects to potentially include different types of participants. This, at least in part, explains why some coordinators observe that:

"In the end, it is always the same people who go on mobility"; "we always meet the same participants" (P8, P10, P11).

"We have a hard core of people who, within the same project, will probably take part in a couple of mobilities" (P5).

Others directly underline the difficulty of reaching new target groups and broadening the participant base:

"We try to send many people on mobility, and new people too, who perhaps have had little experience abroad" (P2).

The interviews show that inclusion does not coincide with the simple availability of mobility places. It requires a set of preliminary actions involving information, guidance, support and accompaniment, enabling potential participants to transform a formally accessible opportunity into a concretely practicable one:

"I fought to introduce Erasmus also in evening school, with adults, many of them foreign nationals, who do not know how to put their documents in order, do not use SPID, etc" (P5).

Definition of internal rules for the selection of participants

The definition of internal rules for the selection of participants is carried out autonomously by beneficiary organisations, Erasmus+ coordinators, intermediary bodies and consortium leaders in order to ensure rotation and distributed access. Inclusion is therefore the result of specific organisational choices, where such choices are made:

"In our view, participating in Erasmus+ mobility should be an almost necessary pathway - I would not say compulsory, but necessary for one's personal development: you have to do it because you need it" (P10).

"We try to send many people on mobility, and new people too: people who may have had little experience abroad, who have never taken part in this type of activity, who have not travelled much. Then we see that the demand for mobility increases: people who have just completed a mobility experience say to us, 'Guys, next time, where are we going, what are we doing, what will we see, who are we going to visit?'" (P2).

"One of the criteria we try to use is not having participated in previous Erasmus mobility experiences; this gives additional points" (P8).

"We try to include new people, so that it is not always the same ones" (P5).

The most structured case is that of the consortium coordinated by P8, where the guidelines for calls for applications include priority criteria for those who have not previously participated in Erasmus+ mobility, while placing participants who have already been involved in previous experiences at the bottom of the ranking list. In the same case, rotation also concerns the organisations belonging to the consortium, through the annual inclusion of new CPIAs and priority given to those that had not managed to send learners abroad in the previous year.

Selection criteria may be established directly by the beneficiary organisation, shared within consortia, or operationally translated by the coordinators responsible for mobility.

2.2. Actual, potential and non-participants in transnational mobility

The evidence collected suggests that the public of Erasmus+ mobility does not, of course, coincide with the whole set of potential beneficiaries of the programme. The processes and practices currently in place appear to favour access by a selected circle of adults, with the consequent emergence of informal rules that exclude people on the basis of:

- participants' areas of residence, particularly peripheral, insular or rural contexts (P11);
- the social and infrastructural characteristics of the territories in which they live (P1, P6, P9, P11);

- language skills (P7);
- nationality, or more specifically the administrative status and legal profiles of refugees and holders of international protection (P12);
- limited autonomy in managing the necessary administrative, digital and documentary procedures (P8, P12);
- low levels of education (P2);
- advanced age (P3);
- heavy family and professional responsibilities (P1, P3);
- lack of membership in associative and community networks (P2, P5);
- a weak culture of lifelong learning (P10, P11, P12);
- weak organisational support and insufficient availability of substitute staff (P6, P9);
- the absence of reference professionals or persons performing intermediation functions (P7, P8).

For analytical purposes, the target groups of the Erasmus+ programme can be grouped into three clusters: the actual public, the potential public and the non-public.

The *actual public of mobility* consists of those who take part in Erasmus+ experiences because they are embedded in organisational, associative or professional networks that facilitate access.

The *potential public of mobility* includes those who could access the measure but encounter various kinds of barriers that limit their participation. These may be territorial, geographical, logistical, symbolic, professional, legal, economic, family-related, linguistic, cultural or organisational barriers. This is not a homogeneous cluster. It includes individuals who are territorially distant, living in peripheral or rural areas, or in contexts poorly connected to educational and associative networks; adults constrained by professional or family responsibilities, for whom a temporary interruption of daily routines is difficult to reconcile with work, care duties or personal responsibilities; linguistically fragile individuals, discouraged by the use of foreign languages; and adult learners who are legally or administratively vulnerable, whose mobility is limited by their status, residence permits, incomplete documentation or restrictions on international circulation.

This group also includes individuals with low educational, digital or bureaucratic capital, for whom access procedures are difficult to understand and navigate independently; economically fragile adults, discouraged by advance costs, additional expenses or the management of the grant; people who are culturally distant from mobility and do not perceive Erasmus+ as an opportunity relevant to their age or social condition; and individuals who are not embedded in associative, professional or community networks capable of reaching and supporting them.

The potential public also includes professionals of organisations that could participate in Erasmus+ but do not have sufficient project-design competences, transnational networks or administrative resources. Finally, it also includes individuals within organisations that are already beneficiaries – teachers, staff members, operators, members or volunteers – who could participate but remain at the margins when opportunities are concentrated within a restricted circle of people who are already motivated, already competent or already involved in European projects.

The third cluster concerns the non-public, referring to people who remain at the margins of mobility circuits and whom the interviewees describe as particularly difficult, if not impossible, to reach, given the instruments currently provided by the programme. These are individuals who do not come into contact with the opportunities offered, not necessarily because of a lack of interest, but because of the weakness of the social, cultural and organisational devices that support the construction of demand for training and mobility.

If, under current conditions, it appears difficult to include segments of the non-public, a different assessment can be made with regard to the expansion of the actual public.

The interviews suggest that the transition from the potential public to the actual public may occur depending on the type of organisational and educational rules and processes adopted by the different actors responsible for implementing mobility projects. This transition is, in fact, strongly mediated by organisations, coordinators, consortia, territorial help desks, social services and professionals performing guidance, support and facilitation functions.

These intermediary professionals do not merely perform a technical function of supporting participation. They also contribute to concretely defining the boundaries of the public of mobility. Their capacity to activate latent demand for mobility among a broader public, especially potential participants, directly affects the social composition of those who take part in mobility experiences and, consequently, the programme's actual inclusive capacity.

In other words, access to mobility appears to reproduce educational differences among the different clusters of participants, even within a broader expansion of mobility provision and despite the role played by intermediary professionals operating within organisations.

2.3. Services and organisational mediations for the accessibility of transnational mobility

The issue of accessibility and participation is directly linked to the services through which the measure is implemented. These services are not ancillary or merely administrative elements of the mobility project. Rather, they represent constitutive components of the measure, since they affect the extent to which potential participants are informed, guided, recruited and selected, prepared, supported and placed in a position to carry out the experience. The analysis of services therefore makes it possible to understand through which organisational mediations Erasmus+ may reduce the distance between potential and actual participants, and in which cases, instead, this distance risks being reproduced.

The components of the Erasmus+ measure aimed at fostering adult mobility considered in this analysis refer to the different types of services offered by the organisations involved in the management of mobility projects (Regione Toscana et al., 2008):

- a. services for the selection of training centres and enterprises qualified, in terms of health and safety standards, to receive participants and implement personalised mobility programmes;
- b. quality standards for the services offered in the implementation of mobility projects;
- c. information services ensuring the matching of demand and supply in transnational mobility, with regard to the objectives, contents and level of specialisation of feasible mobility projects;
- d. assistance in organising stays;
- e. reception and assistance services upon participants' arrival;
- f. assistance services for participants with special needs;
- g. tutoring services;
- h. monitoring services and the use of tools for sharing information with the organisation promoting the mobility project;
- i. evaluation and dissemination of the results achieved by participants in relation to their educational and professional development during the transnational experience;
- j. certification of the learning outcomes achieved through mobility.

The analysis of the interviews shows that the services composing the Erasmus+ measure are not delivered by a single actor, nor are they limited to the formal requirements established by the programme. Rather, they are implemented through a chain of actors – beneficiary organisations, Erasmus+ coordinators, intermediary

bodies, consortium leaders, teachers, trainers, tutors, project managers and administrative staff – who translate the measure into concrete practices of access, support and valorisation of mobility.

A *first group of services* concerns information, guidance and the construction of demand for mobility. In public educational institutions, such as CPIAs and schools, these functions are often performed by managers, teacher contact persons and Erasmus+ coordinators, who present the opportunity to adult students, explain its objectives, conditions and constraints, and support self-application processes (P12).

In third-sector organisations and social promotion associations, information is instead channelled through associative networks, professional communities, territorial help desks and local animation activities (P7, P11). In intermediary bodies and consortia, it takes on a broader function of educational brokerage: identifying less experienced organisations, motivating them to participate, supporting them in understanding the rules of the programme and transforming a formal possibility into practicable access (P10).

A *second group of services* concerns the selection of participants and the regulation of access. The interviews show differentiated procedures. In some cases, selection is managed directly by the beneficiary organisation through internal calls, self-applications, criteria of relevance to project objectives or assessments related to the participant's profile (e.g., P5, P11, P12). In other cases, especially within consortia, criteria are shared at a supra-organisational level: the consortium leader provides guidelines, priorities and rotation rules, while the individual member organisations concretely apply the procedure (e.g., P8). In still other cases, selection takes on a situated and professional form, as the Erasmus+ coordinator translates project objectives, participants' learning needs and organisational constraints into concrete access choices for mobility (P5). Selection, therefore, does not appear as a merely administrative act, but as an educational and organisational device through which the effective public of mobility is defined.

A *third area* concerns the choice of hosting organisations and the construction of transnational networks. This function is particularly evident in intermediary bodies (e.g., P8), among project managers and in organisations with long-standing European experience (e.g., P2, P4), which select partners, training centres, enterprises or host institutions on the basis of their coherence with the objectives of mobility, organisational reliability and capacity to host adult learners, staff or professionals. In museums, foundations and specialised organisations, partner selection is also linked to the possibility of observing methodologies, practices and educational models that can be transferred to one's own context (e.g., P5, P11).

A *fourth group of services* concerns the organisation of the stay, reception and assistance upon arrival. The interviews show that travel, accommodation, meals, management of pocket money, documents, insurance and contacts with the hosting organisation are decisive conditions for making mobility practicable, especially for adults with limited international experience. This component emerges particularly in cases where organisations directly take responsibility for the organisational management of mobility (P3, P8). The most structured case is represented by P8, which coordinates departures, hosting organisations, preparatory meetings, accompanying persons, language training and the connection between sending CPIAs and receiving organisations. In some cases, the beneficiary organisation manages the grant in the form of services; in others, support is provided by teachers, tutors or coordinators who follow participants before and during their stay (e.g., P10, P12). Reception also has an educational value: placement in families, groups or new professional contexts may reduce initial insecurity and foster meaningful relationships (P11).

A *fifth area* concerns assistance for participants with special needs. Some organisations and consortia declare priority criteria for individuals with disabilities or economic, cultural or social disadvantage, activating additional resources or organisational adaptations (e.g., P8, P10). However, the interviews also reveal significant limitations: legal status, residence permits, language difficulties, family constraints and economic fragility may hinder

participation even when the measure is formally accessible (e.g., P7, P11, P12). In this sense, assistance services do not remove all barriers, but they may reduce the distance between the potential public and the actual public. *Tutoring and preparation* constitute a further central element. Teachers, trainers, tutors and coordinators prepare participants linguistically, interculturally, professionally and practically, anticipating the planned activities and clarifying expectations and responsibilities (e.g., P8, P11, P12). During mobility, tutoring supports participants' integration into the host context and fosters the transformation of experience into learning (e.g., P10). For teachers and staff, it may take the form of job shadowing, guided observation, professional exchange and post-mobility reflection (e.g., P5); for adult learners, it may also concern everyday autonomy, management of resources, use of language and relationships within the group (P3).

Lastly, *monitoring, evaluation, dissemination and certification of learning outcomes* are present, but with varying degrees of intensity. Overall, the interviews show that monitoring, evaluation and dissemination often take the form of immediate feedback or organisational capitalisation, while they appear weaker when it comes to measuring medium- and long-term effects.

Some organisations provide for reports, feedback meetings, internal seminars, workshops for colleagues or follow-up activities (e.g., P8, P10). Others acknowledge the difficulty of observing medium- and long-term effects (e.g., P5). Others are still at an initial stage in the institutionalisation of monitoring (e.g., P12), or define it in terms of the creation of ideas, models, tools or project initiatives that can be reused within the territory, thereby turning dissemination into an opportunity for local development (e.g., P7).

The certification of learning outcomes appears less central in the interviewees' accounts than the practical recognition of learning, that is, the participants' capacity to use what they have learned in their work, everyday life or organisation of belonging.

Overall, the interviews indicate that the services connected to the development of Erasmus+ projects (KA1 and KA2) are decisive for the accessibility of mobility. They do not operate as ancillary forms of support, but as educational and organisational conditions that enable potential participants to become actual participants. Where information, selection, preparation, assistance, tutoring and follow-up are structured, the measure can broaden access; where such services remain weak or depend on the initiative of individual coordinators, Erasmus+ instead tends to reach mainly individuals who are already motivated, already connected and already equipped with the resources needed to take part.

3. Discussion and implications for the research

3.1. Accessibility, organisational mediations and the formation of the mobility public

The results presented make it possible to discuss several implications for research on Erasmus+ mobility in adult education.

First, they suggest that accessibility cannot be assumed to be an automatic outcome of the availability of funding, but should instead be analysed as the product of services, professional mediations and organisational capacities. Second, they show that the public of mobility does not coincide with the potential pool of beneficiaries, but is constructed through processes of information, selection, support and intermediation.

Third, they highlight the risk that, in the absence of accessibility-oriented devices, Erasmus+ may primarily reach individuals and organisations already embedded in educational, associative and project-based networks.

In order to understand this process, it is necessary to consider the plurality of organisational actors involved in the implementation of Erasmus+. The measure does not operate through a direct relationship between the programme and the participant, but through a chain of actors composed of beneficiary organisations, sending

organisations, hosting organisations, intermediary bodies, consortium leaders and cooperation partners. Each of these actors performs different functions and contributes to defining who can concretely access mobility. From this perspective, the public of mobility is not made up only of individual adult learners, teachers, operators or professionals who take part in the activities, but also of the operators of organisations capable of identifying, interpreting and using the measure. The presence or absence of professionals and organisational capacities affects the possibility for Erasmus+ to reach new subjects and new territories. Intermediary bodies and consortium leaders therefore play a decisive role: they can reduce the distance between organisations outside European circuits and funding opportunities, while at the same time showing that access to the measure depends on organisational mediations that are not always uniformly available.

3.2. Erasmus+ and learning exclusion equilibrium

The expansion of the Erasmus+ programme to new types of organisations responsible for designing and coordinating mobility projects – primarily third-sector organisations and some types of private organisations, in addition to schools – has certainly had a positive impact on the enlargement of the network and of the points of contact with potential participants (Buiskool, Krichewsky-Wegener & Erckrath, 2024).

However, on the basis of the interviews, this expansion does not appear to correspond to a systematic widening of participation in Erasmus+ mobility projects among less advantaged groups. If the current trend were considered acceptable, this would amount to validating the existing learning exclusion equilibrium as optimal and satisfactory. This equilibrium refers to a situation in which the supply of mobility funded by the Erasmus+ programme stabilises around a static balance that responds almost exclusively to the demand of habitual participants, thereby entrenching the exclusion of those located at the margins of the European programme.

This form of “discrimination” also applies to the organisations participating in European calls for proposals: these are organisations that tend to accumulate project-design competences, international networks and capacity to access funding. Organisations outside these circuits face greater difficulties in developing an autonomous demand for mobility and European cooperation.

When Erasmus+ succeeds in bringing the potential public closer to actual participation, the learning exclusion equilibrium is not overcome. Rather, it may be displaced towards a less restrictive configuration, in which the pool of actual participants expands beyond those already active in mobility circuits. In this sense, the inclusive effectiveness of Erasmus+ cannot be assessed solely in relation to the overall number of mobilities carried out, but must also be evaluated in terms of its capacity to modify the composition of the actual public.

The risk that mobility opportunities may be concentrated mainly among those already active in the international dimension may come into tension with the programme’s inclusive aims, generating a gap between the declared universalism of Erasmus+ opportunities and the actual composition of the programme’s beneficiaries. This should lead us to qualify the judgement of those who believe that:

“Working on participation and on the impact that Erasmus can have on certain segments of the public remains a utopia” (P10).

The data collected reveal a tension between the programmatic universalism declared by Erasmus+ and the social selectivity that characterises actual access to it. The deconstruction of these asymmetries and the progressive expansion towards new publics represent the primary political challenges for realising the inclusive effectiveness of the entire Erasmus+ ecosystem (de Greef, 2021).

3.3. Implications for the research on the impact of Erasmus+

At the research level, the findings suggest the need to shift attention from the study of the individual effects of mobility alone to the reconstruction of the organisational, professional and territorial conditions that make access possible. The Erasmus+ experience cannot be studied solely as a training experience abroad, but also as the outcome of a complex measure implemented through a plurality of services, rules, professional roles and organisational mediations.

This has at least three implications for research.

The first concerns the object of analysis. Studying the impact of the Erasmus+ measure requires considering not only those who leave, but also those who could leave and do not, those who remain excluded from information and organisational circuits, and the organisations that are able to create the conditions for the demand for mobility to emerge.

The second concerns the level of observation. The interviews show that access to mobility cannot be explained solely on the basis of participants' individual characteristics, such as motivation, language skills or personal availability. It also depends on organisational conditions: the presence of contact persons, project-design competences, a culture of mobility, the availability of support, the capacity for fair selection, transnational networks, administrative resources, and the mobility culture of managers and coordinators.

The third concerns the evaluation of the measure's inclusive effectiveness. Evaluating Erasmus+ only in terms of opportunities offered or mobilities carried out risks obscuring inequalities in access. Research should instead examine the capacity of the measure to reduce the distance between the potential public and the actual public, to support less equipped organisations, and to prevent the accumulation of project-design competences and international networks from continually strengthening the same actors.

From this perspective, policy measure analysis makes it possible to read Erasmus+ as a measure that produces effects not only through the funding of mobility, but also through the concrete configuration of the arrangements regulating information, guidance, outreach, preparation, assistance, tutoring, monitoring and the recognition of learning.

4. Methodological note

4.1. Methodological approach

The methodological framework adopted in this study is grounded in the analysis of policy measures (European Commission, 2008; Federighi et al., 2007). This paper examines Erasmus+ as a European policy instrument aimed at supporting transnational mobility, positing that a policy's capacity to deliver its intended outcomes is fundamentally contingent upon how its constituent measures are conceived, designed, and implemented. Consequently, Erasmus+ mobility is not analysed comprehensively across all its dimensions, but rather through the specific lens of its universalistic vocation and its efficacy in ensuring genuine accessibility. This methodological choice is driven by the understanding that, given the available resources and the organisational constraints surrounding its implementation, the Erasmus+ measure must be critically interrogated regarding the mechanisms it deploys to prevent the *a priori* exclusion of the most disadvantaged individuals from mobility opportunities. The research design strictly adheres to the protocols established by the international consortium *Research-based Impact Analysis of Erasmus+ Adult Education Programmes* (RIA-AE), with specific reference to its methodological guidelines (Buiskool, de Greef, & Mulder, 2023; Buiskool et al., 2024). The primary objective is to evaluate the qualitative impact of Key Actions 1 and 2 (KA1 and KA2) on the adult education sector in Italy, foregrounding the phenomenological dimension of professional and organisational experiences.

4.2. Sampling strategy and composition of the Italian sample

The sampling strategy employs purposive selection criteria to capture the diverse array of organisations and professionals engaged in Erasmus+ KA1 and KA2 projects. The sample consists of twelve entities: three public educational institutions, two private enterprises, and seven third-sector organisations (including foundations, museums, training providers, and intermediary bodies) that serve as support, coordination, or facilitation hubs for accessing Erasmus+ opportunities. Consequently, the sample extends beyond direct funding beneficiaries to encompass actors and professionals dedicated to intermediation, mentoring, demand generation, consortium management, project support, and territorial outreach. For analytical purposes, these organisations can be classified into four functional typologies:

1. The first category comprises public educational institutions, such as schools and CPIAs (Provincial Centres for Adult Education), which engage in Erasmus+ as direct beneficiaries and as sending organisations for adult learners, educators, and administrative staff.
2. The second category encompasses associations, social promotion associations (APS), foundations, museums, and other third-sector entities. These operate both as beneficiaries and as promoters of educational, cultural, and social initiatives tailored for adults, professionals, vulnerable cohorts, and local communities.
3. The third category features private enterprises, training centres, and consulting firms tasked with the coordination, conceptualisation, management, and valorisation of mobility programmes and partnerships.
4. The fourth category consists of intermediary bodies and consortium leaders acting as educational and institutional brokers. They facilitate access to Erasmus+ for organisations lacking prior experience or autonomous project-design capacities, with some of these brokers also operating within the third sector or the consulting industry.

These typologies are intended to be descriptive rather than rigidly taxonomic, as several organisations demonstrate hybrid profiles, functioning simultaneously as direct beneficiaries, promoting entities, project designers, or intermediaries.

The professionals interviewed span a wide spectrum of responsibilities in mobility management, including executive leadership, coordination, project design, administration, training, mentoring, awareness-raising, and territorial intermediation. The cohort features executives, presidents, agency founders, Erasmus+ coordinators, project managers, consultants, and personnel dedicated to guiding and mentoring both actual and potential participants. This diverse sample composition facilitates the examination of mobility processes through the lens of actors who not only participate in the programme but actively operationalise it within their respective organisational and territorial contexts.

4.3. Semi-structured interviews and data collection

The analysis of the empirical data follows a sequential workflow that prioritises dialogic and interactive engagement with the respondents. The interview is conceptualised as a collaborative space for the co-construction of meaning, where the dynamic between researcher and participant stimulates professional reflexivity and yields a nuanced understanding of the motivations driving Erasmus+ mobility.

The methodological framework utilised a thematic map of issues, formulated as questions, which functioned as a flexible guide for the semi-structured interviews. A “probing” technique was central to this process, allowing follow-up inquiries to emerge organically from the participants’ responses. Conducted between 2024 and 2026, the interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes each. The interviewer served predominantly as a facilitator –

introducing topics and raising pertinent issues – to ensure participants could comprehensively articulate their mobility experiences. Accordingly, the interviewer’s speaking time was restricted to roughly 10 minutes, thereby dedicating the remaining 40 to 50 minutes entirely to the interviewee’s narrative.

The results of the interviews were subject to full transcriptions (via AI software) that were revised and fine-tuned. These empirical data formed the basis for the subsequent thematic analysis.

4.4. Analysis of the empirical data

Data collection was based on twelve semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol acted as a flexible guide, encompassing questions about the organisations’ involvement with Erasmus+, their procedures for participant access and selection, the perceived impact of mobility, organisational changes, key challenges, and the specific conditions that either enable or hinder the sustainability of results.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and carefully reviewed. The empirical data were then subjected to a multi-stage thematic analysis. This process involved an exhaustive reading of the transcripts, the identification of recurring thematic clusters, the coding of salient segments, and comprehensive cross-case comparisons. Subsequently, interpretive categories were progressively developed, and the empirical evidence was aligned with foundational theoretical constructs. The analytical process was inherently iterative, allowing initial interpretive hypotheses to be continually refined and updated in response to the emerging data.

Finally, to guarantee the auditability of the empirical corpus while strictly maintaining participant confidentiality, all full transcripts and related working materials are securely archived in a controlled-access repository.

4.5. Selection criteria and use of quotations

The quotations presented in the text were selected based on criteria of analytical relevance and thematic representativeness. Specifically, priority was given to statements that most clearly articulate recurring content across the twelve interviews - namely, themes, evaluations, or issues that emerge in multiple instances and are central to the research questions. Consequently, these quotations are not employed as isolated or merely illustrative anecdotes, but rather as discursive evidence capable of illuminating interpretive categories developed through the comparative analysis of the entire corpus.

Alongside quotes representing recurring themes, several statements relating to specific cases have been included when they serve to highlight significant variations, internal tensions, or less frequent but theoretically relevant aspects. In these instances, the quotation is not treated as an indicator of generalisability, but as a valuable element for understanding the complexity of the observed processes, particularly where differences emerge regarding organisational typologies, forms of access to mobility, levels of institutionalisation, or methods of capitalising on learning.

4.6. Anonymisation, auditability, and research limitations

All quotations are attributed using anonymous identification codes to protect the confidentiality of the participants and the involved organisations. These codes distinguish between different types of entities, allowing statements to be situated within their relevant organisational context without rendering the respondents identifiable. The quotations have been kept as faithful to their original phrasing as possible; minor interventions were made solely for readability purposes, without altering their substantive content.

The research, currently underway in Italy, presents certain limitations. First, the corpus is predominantly composed of interviews with coordination, executive, or management figures, and therefore primarily reflects the perspectives of organisational actors engaged in the design and implementation of Erasmus+ activities. Second,

the sample comprises organisations already active within the programme, which frequently possess consolidated project-design competences or are embedded in national and transnational networks. While this allows for an in-depth observation of the processes underlying access, management, and the capitalisation of mobility, it precludes a full representation of the perspectives of excluded or non-participating organisations. Finally, the investigation lacks a longitudinal design: consequently, the individual and organisational transformations described by the interviewees are analysed as perceived and retrospectively reconstructed effects, rather than as outcomes measured over time.

Despite these limitations, the adopted qualitative approach illuminates dimensions of impact that are difficult to capture through standardised instruments. Specifically, the analysis enables the observation of the role played by organisations and intermediary figures in structuring access to mobility, the socially mediated nature of the learning produced by Erasmus+, and the conditions that either foster or hinder the translation of the mobility experience into individual, professional, and organisational change.

5. Conclusion

The analysis highlights that the inclusive effectiveness of Erasmus+ mobility lies in the mediating action of organisations and professionals in facilitating access to the transnational experience. In the absence of structured guidance, tutoring and outreach mechanisms, as well as professionals specialised in these functions, the measure risks reinforcing a learning exclusion equilibrium, by meeting the demand of an already advantaged public and crystallising pre-existing educational inequalities.

The distinction between actual, potential and non-participants makes it possible to observe the relationship between available learning opportunities and concretely practicable possibilities. It shows that the expansion of mobility provision does not necessarily coincide with a social broadening of participation. For this reason, the impact of the measure should be assessed above all in terms of its capacity to reduce the distance between potential and actual participants - and, where possible, also between actual participants and non-participants.

From this perspective, services do not represent ancillary elements in the management of the measure. They constitute essential components of it, since they make it possible to enable the demand for mobility to emerge, support adult learners and organisations less proximate to the European programme, and counteract the tendency to reproduce the learning exclusion equilibrium.

When these devices are structured and accessibility-oriented, Erasmus+ can expand the actual public of mobility. When, by contrast, they remain weak, fragmented or dependent on the initiative of individual actors, the measure risks consolidating the participation of subjects who are already active in educational, associative and project-based circuits.

Notes

* This article is the outcome of sustained and fruitful collaboration between the authors. For the purposes of academic attribution, the authors declare the following distribution of responsibility: Francesca Torlone authored Sections 2 and 3; Marco Ceccarelli authored Sections 1 and 4. Section 5 was jointly authored by both authors.

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³ The components of a measure may be summarised as follows: the object of the measure and the expected results; the explicit and implicit requirements of the target groups; the type of good or service provided; the duration of access to the good or service; the mode of delivery; costs, including direct, indirect and opportunity costs; investments and their distribution; the institutional and organisational actors involved in the financing, organisation, delivery and evaluation of the measure, including their roles and regulatory sources; and the processes and outcomes of monitoring and evaluation.

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