

European Policy Statement

Participation in Erasmus+

Based on its values and the principle of equal treatment and appreciation laid down in its statutes, the Distance-Learning University of Applied Sciences (FERNFH) is committed to a pluralistic, tolerant, and anti-discriminatory attitude in its actions and decisions.

We see the intercultural and international orientation of our study programmes not only as an "extra offer" for our students, but also as part of our social responsibility. Internationalisation is not an end in itself but is always related to its impact on the quality of the output of our teaching and research activities.

The FERNFH can be considered a "niche provider" within the Austrian higher education landscape. This will also be reflected in its Erasmus+ and mobility efforts and international activities.

The study programmes offered by FERNFH are aimed in particular at people who, for various reasons, do not have access to traditional university programs. Some are not mobile enough to be able to simply move their centre of life to the nearest university town, but nevertheless wish to successfully complete a university degree programme or academic short course. For others, their life arrangements cannot be combined with the time constraints of a traditional study programme for private or professional reasons. Since more than 15 years we use teaching and learning methods and arrangements that have led students of varying ages, social and professional backgrounds, health conditions and physical disabilities, geographical and other barriers to successfully complete their studies.

We believe that the number of students affected by the non-traditional study conditions mentioned above is increasing throughout Europe and there is a growing need for internationally operating universities working together in this field.

Distance learning is an integrative form of learning that helps individuals overcome the educational barriers of traditional higher education systems. We are performing well in some of these areas, but there is scope for improvement in others. Our participation in the Erasmus+ programme will help us in achieving these goals better.

We are interested in participating in Erasmus+ actions under all three Key Action plans:

Promoting learning mobility and (virtual) exchanges of learners and staff;
co-operating with other organisations and institutions in teaching and research;
and supporting the development of distance learning education and new and innovative (forms of) programmes within a European and international context.

The FERNFH draws up its university development plan ("HEP") every three years. All objectives and measures related to internationalisation and Erasmus+ (including the award of the Erasmus Charter) are anchored in the respective development plan. This

ensures that it is binding for all institutes and departments to contribute to the achievement of the objectives.

Strategy, objectives, and impact

By participating in the Erasmus+ programme, we aim to improve the quality of our teaching on several levels. On the one hand, on the input side, by bringing in a wide range of competences that are available at other European institutions and, on the other hand, on the output side, by increasing the intercultural understanding and global citizenship among our graduates.

The university development plan 2024-2027 has a special focus on internationalisation and Erasmus+; it is one of the six main objectives of the development plan. Four other main objectives (student centred teaching, increased digitalisation of teaching, individualisation of studies, increasing the range of micro-credentials) and the planned activities that are derived from them are also very much in line with the objectives of the Erasmus+ programme.

- In particular we want to develop beneficial partnerships and cooperations with other open universities across Europe and foster innovations in distance learning education and learning practices. We will share our expertise and experiences with other universities, contributing to the wider goal of improving the quality of higher education in Europe.
- We want to increase the number of international (regular and visiting) lecturers and inter-institutional and international cooperations in teaching to give all our students the opportunity to learn from experts from other European universities.
- We will continue to maintain an inclusive and sustainable higher education model and learning environment that is accessible to all students, regardless of their background or circumstances.
- We will integrate the values of Erasmus+ into our catalogue of “principles and quality criteria for good teaching”.
- We want to promote and increase the number of students and staff who participate in international mobility activities and virtual exchange, at least a short period of time, especially from groups that have previously been underrepresented in mobility.
- In particular, we will promote environmentally friendly practices that include reducing the carbon and environmental footprint of mobility activities.
- We will establish technical requirements for the participation in the “Erasmus Without Paper-Network”.
- We create a better opportunity to embed mobility periods in the curricula of our programmes by including a certain number of ECTS credits to be chosen individually in all programmes.
- We have to increase the visibility of Erasmus+ opportunities among our students, so we are going to set up dedicated pages on the existing Online

Campus to provide more comprehensive information on how to get involved in Erasmus+ activities.

- We want to attract students from other European countries, increase the number of international (regular and visiting) students and therefore promote a more diverse and international student body on our programmes.
- It will be important for micro-credentials and executive education to develop also non-German programmes.
- On the other hand, we will align the undergraduate English courses ("Business English", "Technical English", ...) explicitly with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.
- We will encourage our teachers and students to engage in peer-to-peer learning activities with students from other European universities (e.g. extension of the Global Case Study Challenges) and foster an international learning community.
- We want to integrate our graduates who go abroad more actively into our alumni network.
- We want to develop joint programmes for our micro-credentials.
- We want to contribute to the recognition of non-formal learning by providing access to micro-credentials in the easiest possible way.
- We want to create a sort of "degree mobility" through the introduction of "finish my degree"-options.
- We want to encourage our staff not only to participate in (virtual) academic conferences, but also to organise one ourselves.
- We want to increase active participation in international research and teaching societies.
- Based on the research strategy, more research projects will be carried out within international teams. We will actively encourage to and engage in Erasmus+ partnerships and projects.
- This should also lead to more publications in collaboration with international partners.

At the centre of these efforts is the need to take account of the specific profile of the FERNFH as a pure distance learning institution.

All of this will have a substantial positive impact on our university, our students, graduates, and staff, and hopefully also on the European partners involved.

It will increase our capacity and opportunities to engage in research projects at EU level.

Finally, it will make a small but meaningful contribution to the development of a more inclusive and interconnected European higher education landscape, providing more flexible and personalised learning opportunities and generally help to break down barriers between different countries and cultures.

Indicators

Our internationalisation strategy focuses on qualitative rather than quantitative objectives. Not all the measures that we believe are necessary to achieve the above goals have been formulated in detail yet. They will be developed on an annual basis within the university development plan (HEP).

However, there are already deadlines for the implementation of some concrete measures in support of the above-mentioned goals:

The following should be implemented by the end of summer semester 2024:

- Development of a strategy to attract partner universities from Europe.
- Issuing European Digital Credentials for Learning.
- Creation of an information page in the Online Campus to increase the visibility of Erasmus+ opportunities among our students and staff.

By the end of winter semester 2024/25, the following should be implemented:

- Integration of the values of Erasmus+ into the FERNFH's catalogue of the "principles and quality criteria for good teaching"
- A policy for the promotion of open educational resources.
- Introduction of an English-language short programme (micro-credential).

To be implemented by the end of summer semester 2025:

- At least one micro-credential joint programme.
- Each degree programme runs at least one course in cooperation with a foreign university.
- Integration of "finish-my-degree"-possibilities in every programme.

By the end of the winter semester 2025/26, the following should be implemented:

- 50% of newly created learning documents and study materials will be published under an OER licence.

To be implemented by the end of summer semester 2026:

- Participation in an EU research project.