

CIRCLE U. MOBILITY STRATEGY 2024

BOOSTING IMPACT AND SCALE OF ALLIANCE MOBILITY

Final version

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TABLE OF CONTENT

1	INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND	3
2	OBJECTIVES	3
3	PROCESS AND METHODS USED	4
4	PRIORITISED MOBILITY AREAS	5
4.1	Semester or year-long student exchange.....	5
4.2	Short-term mobility	6
4.3	Large-scale virtual activities	7
4.4	Projections of growth potential	7
5	REQUIREMENTS AND INVESTMENT	8
6	NEXT STEPS	8
7	TERMS AND DEFINITIONS	8

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Entering the next phase of Circle U. collaboration, this first draft of the Circle U. Mobility Strategy will lay the foundation for continuously increasing our mobility numbers in the alliance.

A Circle U. Mobility Committee consisting of lead senior international officers from the nine partner universities was formed in the beginning of the current project phase, and the committee has taken on the development of the first version of the Circle U. Mobility Strategy. The aim is to provide a joint foundation for collaboration with and for international student and staff mobility and international exposure in the new project phase.

The strategy is based on consultations and discussions conducted at all nine partner universities with internal stakeholders at various levels. Each university has indicated which activities and initiatives they would prioritise to work with. In other words, which mobility formats and instruments they expect will be viable, sustainable and ensure growth in quantitative numbers and not least feasibility, resources, buy-in, impact and scalability.

The first version of the Circle U. Mobility Strategy builds on initiatives and experience from the pilot phase, mobility and exposure activities foreseen in the grant agreement and exchanges with other alliances. The Mobility Strategy specifically builds on initiatives proposed and prioritised by the individual Circle U. partners based on their best projections of growth, scalability, and a thorough evaluation of possibilities and buy-in at home universities.

The priorities listed below, are a starting point and are meant to build up the foundation for further upscaling of activities, including additional mobility formats and initiatives. The Circle U. Mobility Strategy is linked to the Joint Policy Framework for Mobility (JPF) that was finalised at the end of the pilot phase. The framework will be updated in the coming year with concrete initiatives supporting the priorities outlined in this strategy.

2 OBJECTIVES

The overall goal of the Circle U. Mobility Strategy is to help direct the efforts to increase mobility for students and staff by focusing attention and resources on selected areas of mobility for the roll-out phase. Impact and quality are central for Circle U. activities combined with quantitative growth in mobility numbers. As indicated in the grant agreement, there are specific mobility targets with an annual increase of 20% on the 2022 baseline.

Whilst the alliance has set specific targets for various mobility types in the roll-out phase, we also aim for initiatives in this strategy to have an impact that will help us achieve our mobility goals in the long term. This will be achieved by increasing visibility, engagement, and a general growth in virtual activities to generate more international exposure.

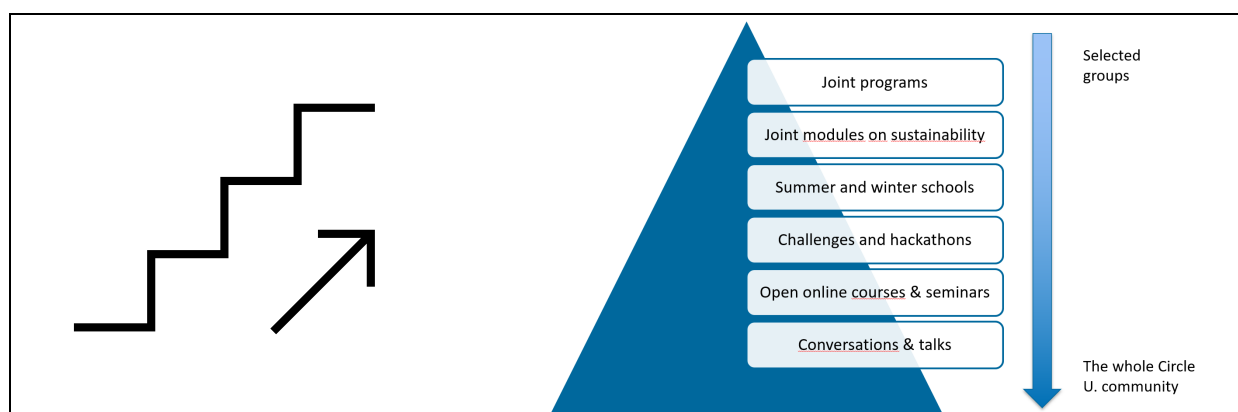
The pyramid of learning opportunities of Circle U.'s Open Campus, see figure 1, serves as a useful way of visualising how mobility formats can complement each other. Activities at the bottom of the pyramid are more accessible and are activities targeted at a wider audience or group of students, staff, and other stake holders, which can generate large quantitative numbers. A joint master programme may be seen as high impact and resource demanding-activity to develop primarily for a narrower target group. The primary focus of the strategy will be on the bottom half to the middle of the pyramid.

Low threshold initiatives such as CU Conversations and webinars on e.g. certain current topics or strong areas of research for the wider audience will serve as a Circle U. branding platform for spreading

knowledge about the strong academic possibilities within the alliance leading to participation in additional activities along the way. It will create brand awareness about Circle U. and access to the unique possibilities that the alliance offers to both students and staff. In other words, the pyramid of initiatives may be viewed as a stairway to collaborative success, where all initiatives are equally important in serving several ways of international mobility, exchange and exposure both abroad and at home.

Walking up the internationalisation stairway, learning at each step, will provide a sound and strong model for developing increased collaboration, mobility and exposure and alliance visibility at all partner universities. This will also require efforts to make mobility easier, and ensure recognition, which will be elaborated under the priorities below.

Figure 1 – International exposure model (Open Campus, WP 3) as a staircase to successful internationalisation



3 PROCESS AND METHODS USED

Under the auspices of the Mobility Committee, the individual universities have worked with a prioritisation of initial focus areas for development and implementation of increased Circle U. initiatives and activities based on the following categorisation model, please see figure 2. Tools employed were e.g. SWOT analysis, and the criteria for judging suitability included the following considerations:

- Budget
- Scalability
- Academic interest/buy-in
- Student interest
- Staff capacity
- Sustainability
- Inclusivity
- Existing formats or offers that could be scaled up

Mobility categories

1. **Study Exchange**—traditional academic year or semester-long exchanges
2. **Placement/traineeship/volunteering/mentorship (PTVM)** —in-person work or study placements, traineeships, volunteering placements, or physical mobility related to mentorship opportunities
3. **Short-term experiences** -(e.g.) in-person summer or winter schools, conferences, field trips, research trips, challenges and hackathons
4. **Large-scale virtual exchange programmes**—virtual initiatives, centrally organised, that bring students together digitally. Ideally, these virtual initiatives can be scaled up to include large numbers of students.
5. **Faculty-initiated virtual exchange programmes**—initiatives led by specific academic faculty members within their own courses or organised around particular research projects wherein students collaborate in-person or virtually
6. **Virtual Mobility**—universities opening up their courses for students outside their university to participate in virtually

4 PRIORITISED MOBILITY AREAS

Using the mobility categories, the following common top 3 mobility formats have been identified by the 9 universities:

- 1 Student exchange, semester- or year-long**
- 2 Short-term experiences, e.g. summer or winter schools, challenges, hackathons, and staff mobility**
- 3 Virtual mobility: large scale virtual initiatives, mostly centrally organized that bring together students and/or staff digitally (mostly without ECTS)**

Following the prioritisation exercise, strategic initiatives under each main category of mobility will be developed. These will include, but will not be limited to, the examples mentioned below.

By combining formats that are well-established like semester mobility with new short-term mobility formats and virtual formats, we believe that we can foster more engagement and deepen collaboration leading to both more and increasingly impactful mobilities in the alliance. The potential, but also the challenges associated with each format, is elaborated below. It is, however, important to keep in mind that it is the combination of these prioritised formats that will serve as the booster for mobility in the alliance. The priorities are a starting point, and they do not exclude the development of other formats.

Internships. e.g. for research, are also a focus for several partners and will be pursued alongside the main strategic priorities.

4.1 SEMESTER OR YEAR-LONG STUDENT EXCHANGE

Student mobility on a semester or year-long basis is the cornerstone of the last 30+ years of internationalisation in higher education. As such, it offers existing infrastructures among all partners, funding through the Erasmus+ or Turing schemes, is well-known among students and has shown a stable albeit slow growth in recent years. Building on our experience in this field, as well as answering to demand from students, is therefore a logical step.

However, there are also challenges associated with this type of mobility, which we must recognise and tackle to improve our performance. Well-known challenges include budget limitations, staff resources for administering both the increasing complicated Erasmus+ programme and the UK Turing Scheme, disciplinary obstacles like professional, statutory regulation for subjects like law, engineering, medicine and nursing, climate, sustainability and inclusion. It is also important to stress that efforts to increase alliance mobility should not come at the cost of other important partnerships that the alliance members value. The

following strategic initiatives address the above challenges and propose various solutions that will have potential for creating increase and impact.

Strategic initiatives:

- Increasing the numbers of bilateral exchange agreements
- Increasing the number of English-taught courses, especially at undergraduate level
- Developing exchange ‘tracks’ for incoming students, and recommend partners’ exchange tracks for local students¹ to facilitate “automatic recognition”
- Thorough analysis of inter-alliance mobility to zoom in on areas with particular potential for growth
- Improved communication on partner websites for both students and mobility advisors
- Involvement of academic departments and embedding in local administrative environments
- Engaging academics via staff mobility to ensure quality and promote relevant opportunities to their students

4.2 SHORT-TERM MOBILITY

In recent years, demand and supply of short-term mobility options like e.g. summer schools has been on the rise, as evidenced also by the successful Circle U. Summer Schools. Shorter mobility experiences can target a wider audience, and the duration and costs make them more inclusive to many students. With the new funding opportunities for blended mobilities in the Erasmus+ programme and the introduction of the Blended Intensive Programmes, the interest in organising short-term programmes has been on the rise. The format will allow more students to take part in activities, it will be a way to involve more academics, and it will create opportunities with our associated partners and can tap into existing summer school or entrepreneurship frameworks, field trips etc. in the alliance. With an increase in academic staff involved, there is potential for further alliance engagement and new activities.

Whilst offering a lot of potential, alliance partners have also faced challenges in organising e.g. Blended Intensive Programmes. Building up the necessary administrative routines is still ongoing with often complex programme requirements. Academic calendars are also a challenge for short-term mobility with narrow windows of opportunity except for the summer. Funding is limited and may be affected by national rules even when we operate under the same Erasmus framework. This means that although short-term mobility offers potential for scaling up and is therefore a priority, there are also important strategic issues to tackle.

Strategic initiatives:

- Continuous focus on optimising admission processes and embedding Circle U. activities in our existing administrative structure to support scaling up without extra costs
- Working towards “automatic recognition”
- Staff training to share best practice to continuously develop and improve administration
- Strengthening collaboration to support the Circle U. hubs and eco-system in developing short-term mobility formats that fit funding schemes and student demand. Focus on staff mobility to build up networks and collaboration in selected subject areas (with fewer partners to assess concepts targeting e.g. underrepresented students)

¹ This will build also on work done in the pilot e.g. in the [Embedded Mobility Toolkit](#).

4.3 LARGE-SCALE VIRTUAL ACTIVITIES

In terms of scalability and potential for branding Circle U. expertise, virtual exchanges – which can take several forms, seem to offer the most potential for growth. For several alliance partners, it is a priority to offer a low-threshold entry for academics new to Circle U. Sharing one's research in a one-hour meeting will be accessible for most students and academics, and setting up a Zoom webinar is relatively easy to manage. These large-scale activities are typically extra-curricular and will serve as an appetiser for students and staff alike and as a kick-starter for further joint activities. The Circle U. Conversations is an example of one such initiative, but other forms could be offered to complement this e.g. in a narrower academic field or in a theme that does not explicitly refer to the Knowledge Hub themes.

The challenge with the large-scale formats is finding a model that appeals to students and can be adequately supported by our universities. How do we make the formats meaningful and impactful? The more targeted and the more embedded virtual activities become, e.g. via COIL activities, the more complicated and time-consuming activities become in terms of planning and delivery. To begin with, we propose focusing on initiatives that will facilitate networking and sharing and obtaining knowledge.

Strategic initiatives:

- More involvement of, and expert input from, associated partners
- Getting more academic staff involved via e.g. events for academics to foster engagement
- Increased staff mobility for teaching as a way of creating closer ties and collaboration
- Improved dialogue with the local learning centers and the CU.til to explore co-creating frameworks for virtual exchange

4.4 PROJECTIONS OF GROWTH POTENTIAL

Predicting in more detail what the growth potential is for the three top priorities is challenging. We have therefore tried to indicate in more general terms what can be expected. This means that we do not think that a 20% percent growth on our 2022 baseline numbers is unrealistic. But with many interdependent factors, some of which are outside our control, like university reforms, budget etc., we think that a more valuable approach is a realistic evaluation of the three areas.

For semester or year-long mobility, building up new agreements, matching curricula, promoting, and advertising opportunities is a process that can take years before any students arrive at the partner university. However, by analysing popular destinations and subject-areas in existing agreements, we may be able to boost numbers also in the short term and making for sustainable exchanges in the long term.

Short-term programmes may have a shorter lead time, and we expect that with improved administrative routines and an increase in offers, it will help us reach our goals. Since we rely on academics to offer the opportunities it is harder to predict precisely what we can expect. For both of the above, budget is a limiting factor where physical mobility is involved. However, activities involving blended formats seem to be on the rise, and we therefore believe there is a solid foundation for growth based on these developments.

To help further both above formats, inviting academics to share their knowledge in virtual formats is seen as a strong potential. This will certainly boost international exposure and facilitate visibility and the further involvement of academics and students. The cost is low and therefore the projection for these initiatives is favourable.

To sum up, it is important to emphasise that with a variety of mobility formats, we aim to reach a wider and more diverse groups of students and staff. The virtual formats should be seen as a supplement to, not as a replacement of, the physical mobility formats.

5 REQUIREMENTS AND INVESTMENT

To succeed with the strategy and the accompanying initiatives, it is important that we commit to investing the proper resources – staff, time, and other resources, to make sure that we can move forward. This allocation of resources needs to come from senior staff otherwise it is likely our ambitions cannot be achieved. This also requires embedding Circle U. mobility initiatives more firmly in the fabric of our universities, and incentivising engagement for academics, another reason senior colleagues' contributions and commitments are crucial to sustainability.

It is recommended that the partner universities develop action plans for the prioritised activities to ensure progress in the development and implementation activities. Boosting mobility is a joint effort, and by using WP2 taskforces and the Mobility Committee as well as other CU work package teams and platforms, notably the Open Campus for dialogue, there is a solid basis for a more sustainable development of initiatives, thus consequently increasing mobility numbers.

6 NEXT STEPS

We will update the mobility strategy by mid-term of the roll-out phase. Meanwhile, the [Joint Policy Framework for mobility](#) and the [Embedded Mobility Tool Kit](#), which were developed in the pilot phase, will be updated and aligned with mobility priorities, and further actions supporting the overall goals for mobility as well as our project deliverables will be launched.

Achieving accurate information on activities will also be a priority. Receiving reliable and accurate information on mobility activities is a known challenge. This will be an important task that will be addressed with the MEL-officer.

7 TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

- **International exposure:** any kind of activity bringing staff and students in contact for seminars, teaching etc. It could be a guest lecture, cooperation between students during a course virtually for a project etc.)
- **Virtual mobility:** defined in the Erasmus+ programme guide as "a set of activities supported by Information and Communication Technologies, including e-learning, that realise or facilitate international collaborative experiences in a context of teaching, training or learning". This means that students will follow courses at partner institutions, and transfer credits, but without physically leaving their homes.
- **Virtual exchange:** 'Virtual exchange' is not to be confused with 'virtual mobility'. Virtual exchange is based on students engaging in structured online intercultural dialogue with other learners as part of their regular courses in their home institutions. E.g. in micro-collaboration projects.

- **COIL:** Collaborative Online International Learning is a specific format for virtual exchange between two or more partners but within existing courses. [COIL: what's in an acronym? \(eaie.org\)](#)
- **Blended Mobility: an Erasmus+** mobility format with a min. of 5 days of physical mobility and a virtual component
- **Blended Intensive Programmes:** a particular version of an Erasmus+ blended programme that is offered under the Erasmus programme requiring a virtual component and at least 5 days of physical mobility. ECTS credits are awarded, and the organising university receives an overhead
- **Erasmus+ and the Turing Scheme:** the two main mobility schemes funded by the European Commission and the UK's governments programme for studying abroad. The two schemes differ in their scope, formats and amounts of funding.