

Defining, Counting and Reporting Mobility in the European University Alliances

THINK PIECE

**JULY 2026
MOBILITY TOPICAL GROUP**

Flexibility as Foundation: Mobility in European University Alliances

European University Alliances were designed as laboratories of Higher Education Integration. Nowhere is that experimental mandate more visible than in mobility. What constitutes Alliances' central advantage, paradoxically represents a major obstacle to consistent reporting and comparability. The issues of definitions, targets, scope and impact were the focus of the FOREU4ALL Topical Group on Mobility's work, carried out through monthly meetings, topical webinars and surveys, resulting in the following recommendations.

A shared framework for defining student mobility is needed to ensure comparability between Alliances, and to enable consistent data collection, monitoring, and reporting. A common framework is essential to improve transparency and credibility of reporting practices and to provide a common baseline for strategic targets (ex. the current 50% target). Without a common understanding, current reporting approaches remain inconsistent and difficult to compare, effectively “comparing apples with oranges.” At the same time, the framework should support innovation and diversity in institutional approaches rather than impose a single rigid model.

The framework should offer guidance and direction, and be at the same time broad and inclusive, flexible and adaptable through offering minimum common standards rather than rigid regulatory definitions. Ideally it should be future-oriented, which would allow for experimentation and innovation and outcome-focused, shifting the focus from administrative format and duration towards educational quality, learning outcomes, student career development and intercultural engagement.

Targets and Scope for Mobility

Mobility targets set for Alliances ought to be ambitious yet at the same time realistic. Excessively ambitious targets risk fostering institutional frustration and may lead to superficial compliance metrics or “creative counting” practices. Viable solutions could include implementing more feasible short-term percentage targets or substituting a global mobility target with an incremental annual percentage growth metric.

Target feasibility is closely tied to scope as well. Alliances require clarity on which mobility and internationalisation formats and durations may be counted towards the target, and widening the scope could help reconcile ambition with feasibility. The current reporting template accounts for physical, blended and virtual mobility numbers. A common understanding of virtual formats and a clear reporting template for internationalisation at home are needed, to provide a more accurate picture of the number of students and staff benefitting from internationalisation activities within Alliances.

Impact and Formats

Regardless of whether one envisions mobility formats as arranged on a ladder, a linear progression based on quality and impact, or through the shopping basket metaphor, where different formats contribute to the same goal in different ways, they all serve as stepping stones towards internationalising the educational offer, providing students and staff with a broader, more innovative and more inclusive range of options.

A strong consensus emerges that learning outcomes, educational quality and impact on the participant are more important indicators of mobility and international exposure than duration or format alone. While duration and formats remain easy to measure and are useful for classification purposes, the measurement of impact remains a big challenge. Research, tools and guidance are needed on how to measure impact on the individual, the institution and the Alliance.

Typology of Mobility and Internationalisation Activities

A. Physical Mobility

A student temporarily participates in learning activities in another Higher Education Institution from the Alliance through physical travel. Some examples are exchange semesters, mobility within joint programmes, intensive programmes, summer/winter schools, international internships and study visits.

B. Blended Mobility

A mobility experience, involving at least one other Higher Education Institution from the Alliance, combining physical mobility and virtual collaboration or online learning where both components are pedagogically integrated.

C. Virtual Mobility

There is a need for common terminology and understanding, especially when it comes to terms such as virtual mobility and virtual learning.

Some examples of virtual learning formats in Alliances include Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), virtual exchange programmes, international online teamwork, and shared digital classrooms.

D. Internationalisation at Home

There is a need for consensus on what can be counted towards internationalisation at home activities and how these should be reported.

Currently there is no way of reporting on the numbers of individuals benefiting from internationalisation at home activities. Some Alliances opt to report the numbers under the virtual mobility category while other Alliances are not reporting the numbers at all.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Establishment of a shared framework for defining student mobility, while protecting the flexibility that makes Alliance mobility distinctive.
2. Adjusting the mobility target considering the definition and scope of mobilities.
3. Providing a clear reporting template that would encompass physical, blended and virtual mobility as well as internationalisation at home activities.
4. Focus on research on the impact of the different mobility formats on the individual, the institution and the Alliance as whole.