

ERASMUS MUNDUS - EXTERNAL COOPERATION WINDOW AS A FRAMEWORK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION COOPERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST REGION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT:

"Erasmus Mundus External Co-operation Window" - student and academic staff exchange co-operation between Europe and Partner Countries - launched by the European Commission in December 2006 as a complement to the original Erasmus Mundus programme (EuropeAid/124352/C/ACT/Multi). The programme provides scholarships for third-country and European nationals/students to facilitate mobility of Undergraduate, Masters, Doctorate and Post-Doctoral students between partner countries and Europe, as well as exchange of Academic Staff for the purposes of teaching, training and research.

The Erasmus Mundus External Co-operation Window (EM ECW) is a co-operation and mobility scheme in the area of higher education co-operation launched by the Europe Aid Cooperation Office and implemented by the Education, Culture and Audiovisual Executive Agency. The EM ECW objective is to achieve better understanding and mutual enrichment between the European Union (EU) and third countries in the field of higher education through promoting the exchange of persons, knowledge and skills at higher education level. This will be achieved through the promotion of partnerships and institutional co-operation exchanges between European Higher Education Institutions and Third Country institutions and a mobility scheme addressing student and academic exchanges.

ITC coordinates the External Co-operation Window Lot 8, former Lot 7 (Iran, Iraq and Yemen) phases 1, 2 and 3 comprising 20 university partners (in Europe, Iran, Iraq and Yemen). In view of the implemented three successful phases of the ECW for the geographical window/Lot 8 and the prospects for new windows launched this year by the EU for the Middle East region, in this paper we will highlight the opportunities and challenges experienced so far in higher education cooperation.

The launch of the windows for the Middle East region and specifically the experience of the Lot 8 EM ECW exchange framework can be potentially considered as a framework for designing and developing other frameworks that can provide a better understanding of the challenges and prospects of the countries in the region and how we can deal with joint educational programmes in a good manner.

1. EXTERNAL COOPERATION WINDOW

1.1 Overview of the Programme

The Erasmus Mundus External Co-operation Window (EM ECW) is a co-operation and mobility scheme in the area of higher education co-operation for:

- the enhancement of quality in European higher education;
- the promotion of the European Union as a centre of excellence in learning around the world;
- the promotion of intercultural understanding through co-operation with third countries as well as for the development of third countries in the field of higher education.

Erasmus Mundus provides a response to the challenges of globalisation faced by European higher education today, in particular the need to adapt education systems to the demands of the knowledge society, to enhance the attractiveness and visibility of European higher education worldwide and to stimulate the process of convergence of degree structures across Europe.

The programme continues and extends the scope of the activities already launched during its first phase (2004-2008) and includes the EM ECW scheme, which was launched in 2006 as a complement to the original programme.

The decision establishing the second phase of the Erasmus Mundus Programme was adopted by the European Parliament and Council on 16.12.2008 (Decision No 1298/2008/EC). The programme covers the period 2009-2013 and has an overall budget of € 470 million for Actions 1 and 3 and an indicative budget of € 460 million for Action 2 (Erasmus Mundus Partnerships). For more information about the Erasmus Mundus Programme 2009-2013 see programme's web pages: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/index_en.php.

As was mentioned above, in the period 2004-2008, country- and region-specific scholarships were funded through the European Commission External Co-operation Instruments, which were not covered by the global Erasmus Mundus I scholarships programme. In this framework several specific "Erasmus Mundus External Co-operation Windows" were "opened" for

students and staff from targeted third countries and higher education institutions from the European Union (EU) and third-countries. It includes partnerships between European and third-country higher education institutions, exchange and mobility at all levels of higher education, including a scholarship scheme. This means support for mobility for students (undergraduate, master, doctoral and post-doctoral) and for staff (academic and administrative).

For the first phase of the EM ECW (academic year 2007-2008), in total 9 geographical lots (the so-called "geographical windows"), which translates a political choice of several countries or regions into a "lot", surrounding the EU were defined. In the second phase of the EM ECW these have increased to 18 lots and for the fourth phase (academic year 2010-2011) the geographical coverage of the EM ECW was progressively enlarged to 21 lots (See Section 2.5 about the EM ECW history).

The EM ECW objective is to achieve better understanding and mutual enrichment between the EU and third countries in the field of higher education through promoting the exchange of persons, knowledge and skills at higher education level. This will be achieved through the promotion of partnerships and institutional co-operation exchanges between European Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Third Country institutions and a mobility scheme addressing student and academic exchanges. Third Country per definition is a country which is not a Member State of the European Union.

More specifically, the EM ECW aims:

- To promote co-operation between sending and hosting institutions;
- To enable students to benefit linguistically, culturally and educationally from the experience of pursuing academic studies in another country;
- To improve the transparency and recognition of studies and qualifications;
- To enhance the skills and qualifications of foreign higher education staff so that they can contribute actively towards improvement of quality;
- To build the capacity of the administration and public and private sector by participation of their staff in higher education mobility activities (especially through doctorate and post-doctorate activities);
- To enhance in the medium term the political, cultural, educational and economical links between the European Union and Third-countries;

2. LOT 8 (IRAN, IRAQ AND YEMEN) OF EM ECW

Erasmus Mundus "External cooperation Window" (EM ECW) for Iran, Iraq, and Yemen is designed to fund higher education student and teaching staff mobility activities between 10 European universities and 10 universities from Lot 8-Countries (L8C) namely Iran, Iraq, and Yemen. For more information see Lot 8 web site at <http://www.erasmusmundus8.net>.

2.1 Coordinating Institution

The coordinator is the Faculty of Geo-information Science and Earth Observation (ITC), Enschede, The Netherlands. There are 20 partners (in Europe, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen) and 10 associates (from Switzerland, the Netherlands, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen).

2.2 Members of the Partnership

A choice among top EU and Lot 8 universities and education institutions is provided, giving students access to the latest developments in the thematic fields of technology, social, political, economical and medical sciences. Partners are widely distributed in major regional centers, as well as capital cities. The partnership comprising 20 University partners (including the coordinating agency) are list below:

1. ITC – The Netherlands (Coordinator)
2. University of Bordeaux I - France
3. University of Algarve - Portugal
4. University of Warsaw - Poland
5. Freie Universität Berlin- Germany
6. University of Deusto - Spain
7. Lund University - Sweden
8. Erasmus University of Rotterdam - The Netherlands
9. University of Southampton- United Kingdom
10. Middle East Technical University - Turkey
11. University of Tehran- Iran
12. Shahid Beheshti University- Iran
13. Islamic Azad University- Iran
14. Shiraz University- Iran
15. Ferdowsi University of Mashad- Iran
16. Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz- Iran
17. University of Dohuk- Iraq
18. IBB University- Yemen
19. Sana'a University-Yemen
20. Tamar University- Yemen

2.3 Associates

Associated partners of organisations or institutions that are also involved in the Lot 8 EM ECW are listed below:

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – Switzerland
2. Khajeh Nasir Toosi University of Technology - Iran
3. Soil Conservation and Watershed Management Research Institute - Iran
4. Shahrood Technical University - Iran
5. Office of International Scientific Cooperation – Ministry of Science, Research and Technology - Iran
6. Khavaran Higher Education Institute- Iran
7. Woman National Committee- Yemen
8. University of Mosul- Iraq
9. University of Salahaddin- Iraq
10. Foundation of Technical Education - Iraq

2.4 Brief Description

The partnership, comprising 20 University partners with a broad geographic distribution, has an enviable track record in attracting able young women and men to the EU. All EU partners have proven their ability to attract and manage complex educational networks; indeed all EU partners currently coordinate or are partners in successful Erasmus Mundus (EM) and External Co-operation Window (ECW) programmes. In these programmes, the consortium partners have demonstrated an ability to implement components of the Bologna agreement, have tackled and found practical solutions to many of the more intractable problems such as visas, multiple and joint degrees, fees and financing, European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), and quality assurance protocols, and the partners offer excellent services to the visiting students and scholars.

As an example, the total open mobility flows for the phase 3 (academic year 2009-2010) of Lot 8 ECW are shown in the Table 1.

Type of Mobility	Europeans	Third-Country nationals			T
	Target Group 1	Target Group 1	Target Group 2	Target Group 3	O T A L
Undergraduates		10		4	14
Masters		23	23	1	47
PhD		9	8		17
Post-Doc		11	8		19
Staff	5	15			20
TOTAL	5	70	37	5	117

Table 1. Number of individual open mobility activities for the academic year 2009-2010

2.5 Project History

The Phase 4 of the EM ECW is built on the previous community programme External Co-operation Window (2006-2009) with a wider geographical coverage, a larger scope and differentiated objectives. The EM ECW has been launched almost 4 years ago with the following developments:

Phase 1 EM ECW: for the implementation of the windows in academic year 2007/2008

Phase 2 EM ECW: for the implementation of the windows in academic year 2008/2009

Phase 3 EM ECW: for the implementation of the windows in academic year 2009/2010

Phase 4 EM ECW: for the implementation of the windows in academic year 2010/2011

In the next section, we will highlight the opportunities and challenges experienced so far in higher education co-operation of Lot 8 EMECW

3. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The existence and content of Lot 8 EM ECW exchange framework was discussed above as a fact after three phases of implementation. The focus of this section will be about **what we can learn** from this framework, **what the real opportunities are**, and how to handle the **known and potential challenges**.

First three phases have proved a mutual beneficial experience. These were contributions made by the applicant, the EU partners, and the L8C partners. As a result a **strong network** and an **academic forum** have been created where further exchanges, cooperation and new projects can be developed in the Middle East region. This is to us a unique opportunity to further sustain and develop the exchange programme.

The experience and specific mission of the coordinating applicant (ITC) in educating students from less developed countries for over 60 years, with many **alumni** (over 500) coming from L8C is a valuable opportunity to the consortium. This **extensive alumni and contact network** of the ITC together with the contact network of the partnership ensure that where opportunities exist, the consortium will know of them and be best placed to take advantage of them. In addition, a

number of Iraqi and Iranian staff members work for the ITC and are available to guide and advise visiting students and scholars. These staff members are known to the consortium partners and are being advertised to staff and students.

Considering the growing demand for higher education and internationalization of higher education in the region, L8C universities including public and private organizations and research centres have the highest level of **potential mobility flows** (the so-called "incoming mobility or **L8C-to-EU**"). The collaborative activities of the partnership with Iran, Iraq and Yemen have so far accommodated only for a small portion of the potential mobility of students and staff.

Capacity building and knowledge transfer - students and staff mobility acts increase the capacity of the L8C partners, as the knowledge and experience gained is returned to the L8C institutions at the end of the study period, not only **knowledge of thematic fields**, but also **knowledge of the EU's higher education system**. Students and staff return home with new skills. In particular, graduates appreciate the culture and languages of the hosting universities, have worked on case studies and developed solutions relevant to their problems, and are exposed to up-to-date research methods and outcomes.

The partnership has also identified **EU-to-L8C exchange** (the so-called "outgoing mobility") opportunities, although the major challenges are recognised, through detailed discussion and planning involving partner institutions in L8C and contact network. In light of the interest that European students and staff have in land sciences, landscape ecology and the cultural situation in the Middle East, mobility towards Iran, Iraq, and Yemen HEIs is organised. Specific disciplines targeted here are Persian/Arab studies and land sciences. Though the major challenges are recognised, the partnership wants to increase the already existing Lot 8 EM ECW mobility towards HEIs located in Iran, Iraq, and Yemen.

All these available **mobility acts** enhance the political, cultural, educational and economical links between the EU and L8C (Iran, Iraq and Yemen) and have also resulted in the promotion of L8C and EU partner HEIs in the region.

The **EU HEIs have high capacities for Bologna process actions and EU educational projects**. These institutional and professional experiences may be passed on to the Lot 8 partners through international cooperation and mobility considering the need of the Lot 8 partners.

As a specific challenge to mention is that the **Target Group 1 mobility** (TG1 mobility - currently registered students/staff at a partner University) should be arranged according to the partner institutions' needs and not only the EU academic staff and institutions' desire. Most Iranian HEIs are interested in sending PhD students (for a maximum of four semesters with joint supervision programmes that actively contribute to the ongoing development of doctoral studies at Iranian HEIs), PostDoc and academic staff members to Europe, whereas Iraqi and Yemeni students need opportunities to complete full Master or PhD programmes. As a result, balance between open TG1 mobility flows based on individual interests, targeted mobility flows based on certain issues considered important by the EU HEIs, and explicit request of the L8C HEIs from the partnership based on certain issues considered important for a larger institutional benefit is required. Therefore, some agreements are required to identify, plan, and support this type of mobility act on the basis of the requirements of the L8C HEIs. High number of mobility

acts for PostDoc, academic and administrative staff members as specialists in their fields, steer mobility at other levels in the right direction. This includes monitoring study recognition, stimulating the set-up of joint programmes, and consolidating procedures for mobility, learning through previous editions of joint educational programmes as well as through national programmes. As such, the particular demands of L8C partner universities and commercial activities whose future depends on good business model as well as technical excellence could be highlighted and addressed in the developed framework of EM ECW.

Profiting from the ECW Lot 8 that provides a good framework to do a **pre-feasibility study** for developing joint education and research programmes in the region by understanding of current and future needs of the HEIs and realistic opportunities; we are able to assess different scenarios having this developed and operational framework of Lot 8 as a test-bed in the region for the development of sustainable joint educational and research projects.

Other challenges for the partnership are the development of **joint degrees** through pilot projects and the development of joint Master and Doctoral Programmes between EU and L8C partner universities. This would help to improve education, teaching and research activities in participating institutions in the region.

It would be worth mentioning that it is a real challenge to keep a good **gender balance** because the amount of female applications is still a lot less than of male applications and eventually the total number of selected female students is less than 30%, in spite of a great deal of effort. Also we are faced with a great deal of cancellations, especially from female candidates from Iraq and Yemen. Then there is the challenge of having a certain entrance level as far as the **required language level** is concerned (English/French). Candidates from the Middle East are less exposed to the English language as European students and the level is considerably lower.

To exchange ideas, views and knowledge among the partners to enhance communication, collaboration, cultural awareness and understanding of current and future needs of the HEIs. This will also give opportunity to learn and share best practices from each other.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Erasmus Mundus “External cooperation Window” (EM ECW) for Iran, Iraq, and Yemen is designed as a framework to fund higher education student and academic staff exchange co-operation between 10 European universities and 10 universities from Lot 8-Countries (L8C) namely Iran, Iraq, and Yemen.

The aim of the Lot 8 of EM ECW is to focus on achieving a flourishing exchange framework based upon real opportunities and realistic objectives and to further sustain and develop a vibrant exchange programme.

Though the major challenges are recognised, this partnership is uniquely placed to maximize the opportunities for, and delivery of, a successful exchange programme with Iran, Iraq and Yemen.

As a real challenge, apart from the existing visas problem, balancing the open and targeted mobility flows across the L8C and EU partner universities, gender balance, reaching the

minimum required mobility flows across the target groups, in particular still the programme sustainability (implementation, organisation and promotion of the programme and courses, providing additional revenues/resources such as additional scholarships for future students, etc.) is noteworthy. As such, in order to create sustainability in the programme further efforts to form and follow up with partners and non-partner universities on partnership arrangements and agreements concerning their educational and research opportunities are required. These could be of formalised bilateral and multilateral agreements, for example, for establishing joint short specialized courses, joint Master and PhD courses between partner universities in the consortium.

Potentially the developed framework of Lot 8 can be considered as a test-bed of pre-feasibility study for designing and developing other frameworks for joint research and education projects and to derive standard and procedure. The framework can provide a better understanding of the challenges and prospects of the countries in the region and how we can deal with joint educational programmes in a good manner.

International opportunities and gain qualifications and knowledge in education, culture, languages, skills, and more specifically professional graduates and staff experience of thematic fields and knowledge of the EU’s higher education system, will enhance the political, cultural, educational and economical links between the European Union and the Third-countries of Lot 8 (Iran, Iraq and Yemen).

5. REFERENCES FROM WEBSITES

Useful internet addresses and documents.

Lot 8 EM ECW web site:

<http://www.erasmusmundus8.net/>

List of the Erasmus Mundus national structures:

http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus-mundus/doc1515_en.htm

European Parliament and Council Decision establishing the Erasmus Mundus Programme 2009-2013:

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2008:340:0083:0098:EN:PDF>

Erasmus Mundus pages on the European Commission – DG EAC Web site:

http://ec.europa.eu/education/external-relation-programmes/doc72_en.htm

European Commission External Cooperation Programmes:

http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/index_en.htm

Erasmus Mundus pages on the Executive Agency Web site:

http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/index_en.php

Programme Guide for Erasmus Mundus 2009-2013:

http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus_mundus/programme/programme_guide_en.php

Relevant information and documentation about the EM ECW can be found at the following webpage:

<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/extcoop/call/index.htm>