User stories

Erasmus Going Digital conference Vienna

User stories shared by the HEIs who have already implemented or tested Erasmus Dashboard and Online Learning Agreement in their workflows illustrating their experience and strategies towards digitisation.

Discussions took place during the Erasmus Going Digital conference hosted by the University of Vienna in April 2019. See more information and download the materials here: https://olaconferencevienna.univie.ac.at

In-depth stories

Digital Erasmus - what is your journey?

Some of the Online Learning Agreement users have shared their experiences and strategies.

University of Vienna

Philipps University of Marburg

Justus Liebig University of Giessen

Breda University of Applied Sciences (BUas)

When the EWP project just started we were very interested in getting on board right away and working together with European University Foundation in the pilot group that existed. However the processes for Erasmus that existed within BUas, did not allow us to. Getting on board straight away would mean making a complex process, even more complex... And be honest, digitising should be a step forward in efficiency, should it not? That is why we decided to take a step back, reorganise first and then get on board with EWP.

Step one for BUas was to look at what was already there: the current state. Visiting every faculty and take the time to literally write down what the process was on a piece of paper. The results of these sessions gave some interesting insights, ie:
- there were 8 different processes to cover only 5 faculties;
- the same set of Erasmus papers were stored in 9 different places on local and mutual drives.

Finally, we also talked to a panel of students about what they thought: they did not understand why the process was so old-fashioned and most importantly not online as everything else was in life… in short, it was time for a change!

So the change began, in February 2019 we implemented 1 completely new centrally coordinated Erasmus process, that was accessible in the portal of the students and stored Erasmus documents in one central place in the Student Information System.

With the new central process in place, we were now ready for EWP and more specifically the Online Learning Agreement (OLA). Every year we send out 200 students on an Erasmus exchange and welcome 125 Erasmus students to our institution.

As the OLA runs through the Erasmus Dashboard, faculty members were a bit apprehensive to start working with an application that they did not know. A situation which probably sounds familiar in a lot of institutions wanting to start with EWP. One of the easy examples we can give you to convince peers and academics, is that we showed the advantages of OLA through the eyes of the academics and students in a before and after situation. Just by making a video of a student getting her Learning Agreement signed in the old situation and fast forwarded the film. In addition we recorded the (lead) time and number of actions completing a paper version of a Learning Agreement.

Number of actions: 20
Time: 45 minutes (not including waiting time of students)

While people were laughing at the ridiculousness of the amount of printing and scanning that was shown in the "old" situation, showing the after situation was then easy:

CLICK 1 SIGN 2 & SEND 3

Fortunately what OLA promises also delivers, resulting in our faculties being very enthusiastic with the simpleness of checking and signing an OLA in 3 steps.

What we noticed in the first period of working with OLA is that the challenge lies now in getting partner universities on board as well. Some of them are simply not able to due to their internal policy. So until the new Erasmus programmes goes live and we all have to work with EWP, we have agreed on a in-between-solution. It is easy enough to print the OLA in pdf in the final stage (when our signature and the student's signature is already on the OLA), manually sign it and send it to the students. In our Student Information System we now require all incoming and outgoing students to upload the final LA version anyway. So for now, we have solved it this way and it can only get better from there.

Having good experience with OLA, we are ready to adopt the next feature of EWP and can safely say that we are one of the practitioners that are EXCITED for the future of the new Erasmus program!

University of Bergen (UiB)

At the University of Bergen, we took the opposite approach, deciding to go for the digitisation of the Learning Agreement as soon as we had the chance. We really believed that we would be much better off getting started with the OLA right away, getting used to the tool from the start, as we had no doubts that this would be our future. The signing, scanning and sending of paper versions also claimed more and more of our resources, as the number of Erasmus students increased every semester. In short, we were ready and open for a digital transformation.

We have a combination of a decentralised and centralised organisation of the Erasmus programme at UiB; all LAs are signed at the faculty level, but they are stored centrally. Using the Dashboard was of course a big step forward from the LA paper version. While the hard copy was signed and scanned several times, sent back and forth, and then had to be printed or saved manually, the Dashboard cover all these processes and all OLAs are stored digitally in one place! So after hearing about the OLA and being asked to pilot during summer 2016, the Institutional Erasmus Coordinator and the international coordinators at two different faculties started preparing the launch of the OLA for outgoing students. Even though we were eager to get the OLA implemented, we decided to start with a small-scale pilot.

The International Centre and the Institutional Erasmus Coordinator took on the lead for this process, realising that this would be an investment that would require some effort, but that would save time and energy in the future. Convincing the outgoing students was really no job at all. Getting our colleagues on board was not difficult either, as the International Centre offered support and training to them and their students. Getting the information out to our partner universities was a bit trickier, though. Because we were one of the first universities introducing OLA, we also got a harder job with this than most of you starting today will have. Now (almost) everyone knows the OLA! One of our biggest problems for the first round of students was to get the signature from the partner university online. Not all of our students get all three signatures online, but the numbers are increasing every semester and last semester two-thirds of our outgoing students were able to finalise their OLA completely online. But as BUas already explained, the time is not wasted, the student can simply download the pdf that already has the student's and the home coordinator's signature and take this to the host university to obtain the final signature.

So, where are we today, three years later? We never looked back and gradually implemented the OLA at all our seven faculties. Where necessary, we looked through our current processes and made adjustments. And yes, we did have to make some extra efforts as well as to figure out how to make the OLA fit our processes along the way. Finally, one year ago we decided to go all in: to make the OLA mandatory for all outgoing and incoming Erasmus students. We receive about 900 incoming Erasmus students every year and send out almost 350, so of course, this was a significant decision to make. However, most of our partner universities were enthusiastic, and for us, the implementation of the OLA for incoming students proved to be a real success, as almost everyone had their OLAs signed online by all parties. However, this sometimes means that students must make two LAs (one required by their home institution in addition to the OLA), but all students seems to do this without any hesitation – and it really is easily and quickly done as illustrated by BUas!

So our clear recommendations to all of you: Just get started!

- Start with a small group of students
- Start with a small group of coordinators
- Start with a good partner
- Start in the spring semester
- Start preparing colleagues, partners and students

Last but not least, remember that the due reward will come once we see online systems like the OLA uses systematically in all universities in Europe.

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