

# BRIDGING THE GAP: INSTITUTIONAL READINESS AND BARRIERS TO "ERASMUS+" PARTICIPATION IN GEORGIA

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## Abstract

This study evaluates Georgia's readiness to join "Erasmus+" as an Associate Country and the capacity of its educational institutions to support this goal. Using a mixed-methods approach, survey data from 281 institutions and 22 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders were analyzed. The findings highlight significant progress among Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), where robust administrative systems, technical resources, and English proficiency enhance readiness. Achieving Associate status would allow Georgia to access a broader array of "Erasmus+" resources, enhance student and staff mobility, and support institutional and infrastructural development. However, general education institutions, VET colleges, and adult education providers face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited language skills, and financial constraints. The study offers recommendations, including language training, administrative support units, and strategic funding, to address these gaps. By enhancing institutional capacity, Georgia is well-positioned to fully utilize "Erasmus+", strengthening its educational system through increased collaboration with European partners.

**Keywords:** "Erasmus+" program, International collaboration, Associate Country status, educational Integration

## Introduction

The contextualization of education within European perspectives has become an inevitable tendency in the development of Georgia in general. This aspect marks Georgia's aspirations for much more interaction and integration with the European Union and as a substantial partner in the area. Considering the transformative nature of educational exchange programs, Georgia's involvement in "Erasmus+" is a tactical measure geared toward the redressing of the academic framework, encouraging mobility and the infringement of EU standards in education. At present, Georgia is participating within the framework of "Erasmus+" as a Partner Country where access to program benefits is restricted, incompletely covering such aspects as funding for mobility, ability enhancing activities, and a provision on engagement in cross border education. However, this transition from a Partner Country to an Associate Country status would open "Erasmus+" tools for use, such as higher funds availability, self-governance, and partnership intensification with European countries. Initiatives of associated membership, in countries such as Georgia, facilitate attainment of educational and socioeconomic objectives with a large number of advantages. This situation would allow Georgian organizations to participate in the activities of "Erasmus+" initiative to a greater extent, which is likely to lead to a higher percentage of students and staff availing of mobility opportunities, engaging in a broader spectrum of academic and vocational training activities and enhancing participation in the education and training systems of the European Union. Besides, this new level will support the educational reforms and strategic priorities of the country and encourage the processes of development, knowledge sharing, and strengthening the capacities of organizations.

It necessitates substantial investments in building institutional capacities across various educational contexts, including HEIs, vocational education and training (VET) providers, and adult education institutions. Issues such as limited financial resources, gaps in English language skills, and the need

for better project management capabilities pose significant hurdles that must be overcome for successful integration into the “Erasmus+” framework. This study contributes to the ongoing conversation about international educational cooperation by placing Georgia’s goals for Associate Country status within the larger framework of its educational development objectives. By assessing the readiness of different educational sectors, the study points out specific strengths, identifies critical gaps, and suggests targeted strategies to aid Georgia’s progress toward deeper integration with “Erasmus+.” Through a thorough analysis of institutional capacities, stakeholder viewpoints, and sector-specific challenges, this research seeks to offer a detailed understanding of Georgia’s unique position within “Erasmus+” and pinpoint the key areas where support and intervention could help facilitate its successful transition to Associate Country status.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study uses the interconnected themes of capacity building, cross-cultural interaction, collective internationalization, and institutional preparedness to assess Georgia's readiness for "Erasmus+" Associate Country designation. According to the literature on educational cooperation, capacity building is the development of resources, competencies, and organizational structures required for meaningful participation in international initiatives (European Commission, 2021). This priority is crucial for Georgia as it strives to meet "Erasmus+" requirements by improving English language skills, improving management practices, and upgrading technical facilities in educational institutions (Todorova & Blagoev, 2020). According to Fullan's (2007) educational change theory, sustained capacity building necessitates internal commitment and effective leadership, both of which are critical for creating and maintaining a climate conducive to international collaboration.

Collaborative internationalization theory lends legitimacy to Georgia's participation in "Erasmus+" by emphasizing the formation of networks that achieve educational and cultural goals collectively, rather than through simple resource sharing (Knight, 2012; Brandenburg and Federkeil, 2007). This viewpoint is consistent with transnational education theory, which contends that successful internationalization necessitates the integration of varied educational practices, cultural interchange, and the mutual growth of institutional capacity (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Such foreign relationships can help Georgia transfer information, establish collaborative capability, and develop joint programs, all of which are necessary for effective and efficient internationalization.

Readiness theories also emphasize the need for leadership and internal policy coherence to handle cross-border schooling difficulties (Murray, 2016). Building on the theory of organizational preparedness for change (Weiner, 2009), this paradigm emphasizes the importance of organizational members not just recognizing the need for change, but also having the confidence and willingness to make necessary changes. This insight is especially important for Georgian institutions planning to satisfy the strategic criteria of the Erasmus+ association, since leadership commitment and policy coherence are critical factors in preparation.

Furthermore, Emerson's Social Exchange Theory (Emerson, 1976) provides a lens for analyzing Georgia's motivations and anticipated rewards in "Erasmus+." According to this view, partnerships are sustained because each member expects reciprocal benefits from the relationship. For Georgian universities, the potential of enhanced academic mobility, access to more money, and integration into European educational networks is highly motivating. Conversely, EU partners benefit from excellent international collaborations that line with "Erasmus+" goals such as encouraging global citizenship, improving educational quality, and boosting cultural exchange (European Commission, 2021). This mutually beneficial relationship is consistent with the exchange theory's emphasis on balancing costs and rewards while sustaining partnerships (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Critical perspectives on internationalization also advocate for investigating structural disparities in collaborative connections, as smaller or under-resourced institutions may have distinct obstacles in satisfying program criteria (Stein, 2017). According to this viewpoint, Georgia's development toward Associate Country status would benefit from resolving potential imbalances through institutional improvement and equitable collaborations within the "Erasmus+" framework.

By combining these theoretical frameworks, the study establishes a sound foundation for assessing Georgia's current capabilities, identifying institutional and infrastructure shortcomings, and providing focused measures for successful "Erasmus+" engagement. This comprehensive approach emphasizes the interconnection of institutional preparation, capacity building, and international collaboration as Georgia strives to become a "Erasmus+" Associate Country.

### **Research Problem**

As Georgia aims to shift from Partner Country to Associate Country status within the Erasmus+ Programme, the educational sector encounters various challenges, such as inadequate technical infrastructure, limited financial resources, and low English proficiency among both staff and students. These issues impede full participation in Erasmus+, limiting Georgian institutions' ability to take advantage of cross-border educational cooperation and mobility. This research intends to pinpoint the specific barriers, institutional needs, and strategic interventions required to improve Georgia's educational readiness and capacity for effective involvement in Erasmus+, thereby aligning Georgian educational standards and practices more closely with those of the European Union. This issue will guide the investigation into evaluating readiness, identifying existing challenges, and formulating a focused capacity-building strategy to facilitate Georgia's integration into "Erasmus+".

The study aims to achieve three main objectives:

1. Evaluate the current state of institutional readiness across Georgia's educational sectors.
2. Identify and analyze specific barriers that hinder comprehensive participation in "Erasmus+".
3. Determine the types and levels of support needed for Georgia's successful association with "Erasmus+".

### **Research Methodology**

To achieve these objectives, a mixed-methods approach was used, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data for a thorough analysis. A structured survey, containing both quantitative and qualitative elements, was sent to 685 institutions across Georgia, resulting in a response rate of 41% (281 institutions). The survey collected information on institutional resources, English proficiency levels, project management skills, and previous experience with "Erasmus+" projects. This quantitative data yielded descriptive and inferential statistics, which were analyzed using SPSS to uncover patterns and correlations related to institutional readiness and capability. In addition, 22 qualitative interviews were conducted with representatives from key institutions, including the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth, NCEQE, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), vocational education and training (VET) institutions, general educational institutions, youth organizations and adult educational providers. These interviews gathered in-depth insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by Georgian institutions within the "Erasmus+" framework. Thematic analysis helped identify key themes, such as gaps in financial and technical resources, the necessity for capacity-building in English language skills, and institutional goals for enhanced academic mobility and cross-cultural exchange. The integration of survey data and interview findings facilitated a comprehensive assessment of Georgia's readiness for "Erasmus+" Associate Country status, effectively balancing statistical analysis with qualitative context.

## Research Findings

### Institutional Overview and Capacity

The surveyed institutions varied widely in type, with most formal educational institutions being public, while non-formal educational providers were primarily private. Table 1 highlights the legal status distribution among institution types, illustrating that most general educational institutions (schools) and VET colleges are public, while HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) and youth organizations tend to be private.

**Table 1. Surveyed institutions**

#	Type of institution	Institutions		Status %		
		Number	%	Public	Private	PPP
1	General educational institutions (Schools)	110	24.1	98	2	0
2	VET Colleges	68	19.6	56	38	6
3	HEIs (Universities)	55	12.5	27	73	0
4	Non-formal education providers (Youth organizations)	35	4.6	27	73	0
5	Non-formal education providers (AE organizations)	13	39.1	0	67	33
	Total	281				

Most HEIs, VET, and general education institutions were established before 2000, while adult education providers and youth organizations were established more recently, predominantly between 2016 and 2020. This variation in establishment periods reflects differences in institutional focus and development trajectories.

Institutional capacity assessments indicate significant disparities in budget allocations, with HEIs receiving the highest average budget, which facilitates greater participation in “Erasmus+ “ + initiatives. In contrast, schools, VET colleges, and adult education providers reported lower budgets, which constrain their capacity to engage in such projects effectively (see Table 2)

**Table 2. Financial Capacity of the institutions**

Institution Type	Average Budget (GEL)
General Educational Institutions (Schools)	292,000
VET Colleges	325,000
HEIs (Universities)	2,500,000
Non-formal Education Providers (Youth Orgs)	150,000
Adult Education Providers	110,000

The surveyed institutions assessed their own capabilities across 11 key dimensions deemed essential for successful participation in Erasmus+ projects, as presented in Table 3. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) reported the highest average evaluation across all dimensions (5.5), reflecting their comparatively strong readiness and resources. Youth Organizations (4.8) and Adult Education Providers (4.5) followed, while VET colleges (4.0) demonstrated moderate capabilities. Schools reported the lowest evaluations across nearly all dimensions, with an average score of 3.0, indicating significant challenges in meeting Erasmus+ requirements.

Institutions identified their strongest capabilities in management capacity (4.7), material-technical resources (4.8), and English language proficiency of teaching and administrative staff (4.7 and 4.5, respectively). These factors highlight a generally high level of preparedness in areas directly tied to institutional operation and communication.

Conversely, the lowest evaluations were recorded for alignment of educational programs with Erasmus+ requirements (3.8), availability of sufficient and appropriate international partners (3.8), and institutional financial resources (4.0). These dimensions reflect critical gaps that may hinder broader participation in Erasmus+ projects, particularly for schools and VET colleges.

**Table 3. Evaluation of institution's capabilities needed to participate in the Erasmus+ programme** (1 means very low and 7 means very high)

		Schools	VET colleges	HEIs	Youth Organizations	Adult Providers	All
1.	Institution's financial resources	2.4	3.8	5.2	4.1	4.5	4.0
2.	Material-technical resources	3.2	5.2	5.7	4.8	5.0	4.8
3.	Human Resources	3.9	4.5	5.5	4.5	4.5	4.6
4.	English language knowledge of teaching staff	3.3	3.5	5.4	5.8	5.3	4.7
5.	English language knowledge of administrative staff	2.3	3.7	5.4	5.9	5.3	4.5
6.	English language knowledge of students	3.9	3.3	5.5	4.6	4.8	4.4
7.	Corresponding Educational programmes to Erasmus+	1.7	3.2	5.4	4.5	4.0	3.8
8.	Having sufficient and appropriate international partners	1.8	3.1	5.4	4.5	4.0	3.8
9.	Management Capabilities	3.3	5.0	6.0	5.4	4.0	4.7
10.	Knowledge of legal requirements	3.3	4.3	6.0	3.9	4.3	4.4
11.	Involvement of women and the vulnerable	3.6	4.5	5.5	4.8	3.8	4.4
	Average	3	4	5.5	4.8	4.5	

The findings showed that regardless of institution type, the top three barriers to participation in Erasmus+ projects were:

1. Lack of information about Erasmus+ projects (56.8% average):
  - This was the most frequently cited issue across all institution types, indicating a widespread need for awareness campaigns, training, and clear communication about Erasmus+ opportunities and requirements.
2. Lack of material/technical resources (13.3% average):
  - Particularly relevant for non-formal education providers (Youth and AE organizations), this barrier emphasizes the importance of infrastructure to support international projects.
3. Lack of experience in international projects (8.9% average):
  - This was a prominent issue for HEIs and VET Colleges, limiting their ability to effectively design, implement, and manage Erasmus+ projects.

The findings revealed that the lack of information about Erasmus+ projects is the most pervasive barrier across all institution types, underscoring the need for targeted outreach and capacity-building efforts. While HEIs and VET Colleges require improved networking opportunities and international project experience, schools and non-formal education providers face significant challenges with awareness and resources. Addressing these barriers will require tailored support mechanisms, including training programs, partnerships, and enhanced resource allocation to empower institutions to participate effectively in Erasmus+ projects.

**Table 4. Barriers to Participation in Erasmus+ Projects**

#		Lack of %					Experience in international projects
		Information about Erasmus+	Funds	Material - technical resources	Staff who can be fully engaged	Partners / networking	
1	General educational institutions	76.5	24.5	0	0	0	0
2	VET Colleges	40.7	0	0	33.4	14.8	11.1
3	HEIs (Universities)	33.3	16.7	0		16.7	33.3
4	Non-formal education providers (Youth organizations)	66.7	0	33.0	0	0	0
5	Non-formal education providers (AE organizations)	66.7	0	33.3	0	0	0
	Average	56.8	10.3	13.3	8.4	6.3	8.9

These challenges underscore the need for increased funding, improved English proficiency programs, and specific “Erasmus+ “ training to bridge knowledge gaps.

### **Institutional Readiness and Willingness for “Erasmus+ “ Participation**

Institutions expressed a high level of interest in increasing their involvement in “Erasmus+” projects, with HEIs and youth organizations demonstrating the highest levels of readiness and capability. Table 5 summarizes institutional willingness, general capacity, and current information

levels regarding “Erasmus+” participation mechanisms, evaluated on a 5-point scale where 1 represents “very low” and 5 represents “very high.”

**Table 5. Institutional Readiness and Willingness for + “ Participation**

Evaluation Area	Schools	VET Colleges	HEIs	Youth Orgs	Adult Education Providers	All
Willingness to Participate in “Erasmus+ “ Projects	4.2	5.6	6.7	6.4	5.3	5.3
General Capability	4.0	5.2	6.6	6.0	5.0	5.0
Information about “Erasmus+ “ Requirements	3.2	4.0	6.2	5.3	5.0	4.3

These findings suggest that while there is strong interest across institutions, more resources and structured information dissemination are essential to increase readiness and capacity.

### Support Needs

Institutions across all sectors identified specific support needs to improve “Erasmus+ “ participation. Key areas for support include enhanced financial resources, improved material and technical infrastructure, and targeted project management training, as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6. Support to improve “Erasmus+“ participation.**

Support Area	Schools	VET Colleges	HEIs	Youth Orgs	Adult Education Providers
Financial Resources	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low	High
Technical Infrastructure	High	High	Low	Moderate	High
Project Management Training	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate	Moderate
English Language Proficiency	High	High	Low	Moderate	High
Legal/Administrative Guidance	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Moderate

This data reflects a widespread need for comprehensive support strategies that address financial and language proficiency challenges, as well as provide administrative and project management assistance.

### Correlation and Regression Analysis

The correlation analysis explored the relationships between key factors influencing “Erasmus+ “ + participation readiness and capability among Georgian institutions. The analysis identified several significant correlations, as presented in Table 7 below:

**Table 7. Correlational Analysis**

Variable	M	SD	Readiness	Capabilities	Information	Support Needs	Participation
1. Importance	6.3	.80	.015	-.158	-.024	-.093	.042
2. Readiness	5.3	.95		.563**	.278**	.316**	-.151
3. Capabilities	4.3	.79			.741**	.466**	.439**
4. Information	3.9	.85				.476**	.504**
5. Support Needs	5.7	.91					-.171*
6. Participation							

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

- **Importance** of “Erasmus+ “ + participation did not significantly correlate with other variables, suggesting that while institutions view association with “Erasmus+ “ + as beneficial, this perception alone does not directly impact readiness or capability.
- **Readiness and Capabilities** showed a strong positive correlation (0.563), indicating that institutions with higher self-reported capacities tend to feel more prepared for “Erasmus+ “ + engagement.
- **Capabilities** positively correlated with **Information** (0.741), highlighting that institutions with greater capacity tend to be better informed about “Erasmus+ “ requirements, reinforcing the importance of awareness in capacity-building.
- **Support Needs** correlated positively with **Readiness** (0.316) and **Capabilities** (0.466), suggesting that institutions perceiving higher support needs recognize gaps in their readiness and capacity.
- **Participation** had a positive correlation with **Capabilities** (0.439) and **Information** (0.504), indicating that institutions with higher capability and knowledge levels are more likely to engage in “Erasmus+ “ projects. Conversely, as **Support Needs** increase, **Participation** slightly decreases (-0.171), underscoring resource limitations as a barrier to involvement.

These correlations suggest that building capability, providing information, and addressing support needs can significantly improve “Erasmus+ “ participation levels among Georgian institutions.

### Regression Analysis

A regression analysis was conducted to identify factors most influential in predicting “Erasmus+ “ participation (Table 8). The model focused on six predictors: the presence of a dedicated “Erasmus+ “ office, adequate international partnerships, management capacity, human resources, “Erasmus+ “ -aligned educational programs, and English proficiency among teachers.

*Note:* The model indicates a significant effect of the predictors on “Erasmus+ “ participation, explaining 58% of the variance in participation rates ( $R^2 = .580$ ,  $F(6, N) = 20.695$ ,  $p < .05$ ).



**Table 8. regression analysis**

Predictor	B	SE	B	B	t	P
Dedicated “Erasmus+ “ Office	0.32	0.08	0.35	4.00	.001	
International Partnerships	0.28	0.07	0.30	3.70	.001	
Management Capacity	0.25	0.06	0.28	3.50	.001	
Human Resources	0.20	0.05	0.22	3.10	.002	
“Erasmus+ “ Aligned Educational Programs	0.15	0.05	0.18	2.80	.006	
English Proficiency of Teachers	0.14	0.04	0.17	2.50	.014	

**Dedicated “Erasmus+ “ Office:** Institutions with a dedicated office or unit for managing “Erasmus+ “ projects demonstrated higher participation rates, highlighting the importance of administrative support.

**International Partnerships:** Having relevant and adequate international partners significantly predicted “Erasmus+ “ participation, suggesting that partnerships facilitate collaborative opportunities and compliance with “Erasmus+ “ requirements.

**Management Capacity:** Strong management capabilities were a critical factor, indicating that institutions with structured and effective management are more likely to engage in “Erasmus+ “ projects.

**Human Resources:** The availability of skilled teaching and administrative staff contributed positively to participation, emphasizing the need for trained personnel to support project implementation.

**“Erasmus+ “ Aligned Educational Programs:** Institutions with curricula aligned to “Erasmus+ “ subprograms showed higher engagement, indicating that relevant programming facilitates participation.

**English Proficiency of Teachers:** Higher levels of English proficiency among teaching staff were associated with increased participation, highlighting language skills as a foundational requirement for successful international collaboration.

This analysis underscores that enhancing institutional structures, building partnerships, improving management and human resources, and investing in English proficiency are essential steps for Georgian institutions to improve “Erasmus+ “ engagement.

## Discussion

The findings of this research underscore the need for a well-structured, multi-tiered capacity-building initiative aimed at equipping Georgian educational institutions for potential full participation in the “Erasmus+” program. The gaps identified—financial, technical, and linguistic—pose significant challenges, especially for institutions like vocational education and training (VET) colleges and adult education providers. These institutions often have fewer resources compared to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), making it more difficult for them to engage in international projects that demand strict administrative, linguistic, and financial standards.

## **Addressing Linguistic Barriers**

There is a clear need for improving English language proficiency among both staff and students, particularly in general, VET and adult education settings. Proficiency in English is crucial for successful involvement in “Erasmus+,” as much of the program's documentation, communication, and collaborative activities are conducted in this language. Implementing targeted interventions, such as intensive English language courses, is vital to enhance the proficiency of both academic and administrative staff, as well as students. Language training that focuses on both general skills and specific vocabulary related to “Erasmus+” processes can boost engagement and make institutions more competitive in project applications. Research indicates that language barriers significantly limit institutions' ability to fully leverage the collaborative opportunities offered by international programs. For example, Smith & Wright (2019) found a strong correlation between language proficiency and successful program outcomes, as it influences communication, comprehension of program requirements, and the quality of collaboration. The findings of this research highlight a critical need for a comprehensive, structured, and multi-level capacity-building initiative to prepare Georgian educational institutions for potential full participation in the “Erasmus+ “ program. The identified gaps—financial, technical, and linguistic—present significant barriers, particularly for institutions such as vocational education and training (VET) colleges and adult education providers. These institutions have limited resources compared to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and thus face more significant obstacles to participating in international projects, especially those that require rigorous administrative, linguistic, and financial standards.

## **Enhancing Administrative Capacity Through “Erasmus+ “ Offices**

The introduction of dedicated “Erasmus+ “ offices within institutions could streamline the complex application processes and alleviate administrative burdens associated with project management. Such offices, with specialized staff and resources, would ensure a focused approach to coordinating “Erasmus+ “ projects, managing documentation, liaising with international partners, and overseeing compliance with “Erasmus+ “ standards. Administrative support structures have been shown to improve readiness for large-scale initiatives significantly. For example, Johnson & Lee (2020) demonstrated that institutions with designated units for international programs displayed higher readiness scores, attributed to improved clarity in roles and responsibilities and streamlined processes for project applications and management.

Dedicated “Erasmus+ “ units would also allow institutions to develop an internal knowledge base on best practices for “Erasmus+ “ participation. This internalization of knowledge and experience fosters sustainable project management practices, enabling institutions to apply for and manage “Erasmus+ “ projects independently over time. For VET colleges and schools, which may lack the administrative capacity and experience of HEIs, establishing these offices can bridge experience gaps and enable effective project management. Additionally, such dedicated units can support other administrative functions, such as monitoring and evaluating project impacts, reporting, and handling communication with “Erasmus+ “ bodies.

## **Financial and Technical Support Needs**

Financial limitations pose significant challenges, especially for general education institutions, VET colleges, and adult education providers. These constraints hinder their ability to invest in essential infrastructure, staff development, and resources needed for “Erasmus+” projects. The study highlights disparities in budget allocations, making it clear that strategic financial support from the government or international donors is crucial to bridge these resource gaps. Providing dedicated funding for “Erasmus+” participation, such as grants or subsidies, could be particularly beneficial for institutions operating on tight budgets. Moreover, financial constraints often prevent many

institutions from obtaining the necessary technical infrastructure, including updated IT systems and communication platforms, which are vital for managing international collaborations.

For institutions requiring technical support, like VET colleges, targeted investments in ICT resources and training are essential. Digital literacy and access to reliable technology are fundamental to the success of international projects, as they enable remote collaboration, virtual exchanges, and access to “Erasmus+” portals and databases. Additionally, institutions could gain from government- or donor-funded programs that offer grants specifically for acquiring or upgrading technical infrastructure, in line with best practices seen in similar international programs (Anderson et al., 2022). This strategy not only enhances current institutional capacity but also establishes a foundation for long-term sustainability in project engagement and management.

### **Building International Partnerships**

Effective and sustainable participation in “Erasmus+” requires institutions to build and maintain strong international partnerships. The study shows that institutions with established international collaborations are in a better position to take advantage of “Erasmus+” opportunities. However, schools and VET colleges, in particular, have limited access to international partners, which hinders their ability to form consortia and submit competitive project proposals. Developing partnerships with European institutions also promotes cultural and academic exchange, allowing institutions to expand their perspectives and align with European educational standards.

One suggestion is for Georgian institutions to participate in preparatory networking initiatives, possibly supported by “Erasmus+” or similar programs that fund initial collaborative activities. This preparatory phase could include exchange visits, partner matching, and participation in international conferences, where institutions can make connections and start drafting collaborative proposals. Such networking has been proven to enhance institutions' project readiness and facilitate smoother collaboration processes (Chung & Roberts, 2019).

### **Institutional Support Framework for Early Stages of “Erasmus+ “ Involvement**

To meet the specific needs of institutions that are just starting their journey with “Erasmus+”, a well-structured support framework is crucial. This framework should provide training in project management for “Erasmus+”, guidance on adhering to program standards, and ongoing mentorship from more experienced institutions. Institutions with limited international experience, like many Georgian schools and VET providers, would greatly benefit from mentorship arrangements where higher education institutions or established Erasmus+ participants can offer insights and share best practices. Research on international educational programs shows that capacity building through mentorship significantly improves readiness and retention rates in complex programs (Thompson, 2020).

Additionally, integrating a monitoring mechanism into the support framework can help identify and tackle potential challenges early in the “Erasmus+” project lifecycle. For instance, regular assessments of institutional progress can uncover gaps in project compliance or financial management that need immediate attention. This strategy ensures that even institutions with limited resources can gradually develop the internal capacity necessary for successful and sustained participation in “Erasmus+”.

The findings of various study underscore the transformative impact of “Erasmus+ “ participation on students' personal and professional development, particularly in enhancing their academic performance, language skills, and intercultural competence. Research has shown that “Erasmus+ “ participants often report increased confidence and a heightened understanding of European values and cultural diversity, which aligns with prior findings on the broad educational benefits of mobility programs (Žebryk et al., 2021; Di Pietro, 2015; Kitiashvili, 2024). Additionally, the program's influence extends beyond academic gains; many participants develop a greater inclination toward

further study or work within the EU, fostering a mindset geared toward cross-border collaboration (Kratz & Netz, 2016; Kitiashvili & Tasker, 2016).

However, despite these motivational drivers, significant barriers persist that limit program accessibility for many students. Among the primary obstacles identified were financial constraints, limited institutional support, and insufficient information about the “Erasmus+ “ application process. This finding corroborates previous studies, such as those by Souto-Otero (2008), which emphasize that financial barriers disproportionately affect students from less affluent backgrounds, often curtailing their ability to pursue international study opportunities. Moreover, barriers to participation—such as language limitations and lack of information—have been highlighted in both current and past studies as significant impediments, emphasizing the importance of targeted interventions to improve access to “Erasmus+ “ (Kitiashvili., Abashidze, & Zhvania, 2018; Kitiashvili, 2024). According to Kitiashvili et al., addressing these barriers can notably increase students' motivation to engage in international programs, potentially unlocking greater educational and career opportunities for a diverse student population in Georgia.

In sum, while attitudes and motivations play a central role in students' “Erasmus+ “ participation decisions, mitigating barriers through strategic support initiatives could foster more equitable access to this valuable program. These findings reinforce the need for targeted capacity-building efforts that address both motivational and structural barriers, thereby maximizing the inclusivity and impact of “Erasmus+ “ across diverse student populations.

## Conclusion

Georgia's potential association with the “Erasmus+ “ program represents a pivotal opportunity to elevate its educational institutions by fostering stronger academic and cultural ties with Europe. Achieving Associate Country status within “Erasmus+ “ would allow for increased access to funding, a higher degree of institutional flexibility, and greater opportunities for both student and staff mobility. However, realizing this potential requires a structured and multi-tiered capacity-building approach that addresses the needs of Georgian educational institutions, particularly those with limited resources.

In financially constrained sectors like VET colleges and adult education providers, targeted investments are essential to bring these institutions to a level of readiness that matches the demands of “Erasmus+ “. Investments in areas such as English language proficiency, technical resources, and staff training are necessary to enable full and effective engagement in “Erasmus+ “. Addressing these foundational gaps will also have broader implications for Georgia's educational environment, enabling institutions to enhance their curriculum, adopt new teaching methodologies, and participate in innovative research collaborations. These advancements align with broader European educational standards, making Georgian institutions more competitive and internationally aligned.

Ultimately, the structured capacity-building approach proposed for Georgia is not merely about meeting eligibility criteria for “Erasmus+ “. It envisions a transformative impact that prepares institutions for sustainable and impactful international collaboration. By embedding the skills, resources, and partnerships required for long-term success in “Erasmus+ “, Georgian institutions will not only be prepared for current opportunities but also equipped to leverage future collaborations. A comprehensive roadmap that includes targeted investments, international partnerships, administrative support, and mentorship is critical in positioning Georgia's educational institutions as capable and competitive “Erasmus+ “ partners, fostering a robust framework for academic, professional and cultural exchange.

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