

Signing a Bilateral or a Multilateral Agreement?

1. Introduction

An Erasmus+ academic exchange agreement is a formal and official contract established between two institutions to provide a legal framework for mutual collaboration. Among other data, this framework defines the signatories, the agreed mobility flows, the participation requirements, the grading system standards, and the quality assurance mechanisms for teaching and management.

The Erasmus+ programme offers two options for agreements: bilateral agreements, signed between two institutions (Inter-Institutional Agreement – IIA), and multilateral agreements, signed among several institutions (Multilateral Inter-Institutional Agreement – MIIA). The former (IIAs) are ideal for direct and specific collaborations between two institutions.

Advantages:

- Maximum flexibility when negotiating student places, deadlines, and specific conditions.
- Greater simplicity throughout the negotiation process.
- Facilitates closer, long-term cooperation between partners.

Disadvantages:

- Limited scope, as it only covers one specific partner.
- Inefficient when aiming for a wide range of opportunities, since new documents must be formalised for every single new partner.

Conversely, MIIAs are suitable for consortia, university networks, or scenarios where an institution sends students interchangeably to different partners.

Advantages:

- Streamlining and standardisation of management.
- By signing a single framework document, bureaucratic procedures are reduced for a large number of mobilities.

Disadvantages:

- Low flexibility to adapt conditions to the unique needs of each partner.
- Greater complexity in execution, as it requires consensus among each and every partner.

2. So, which model best suits my needs?

For standard mobility flows, it is advisable to sign IIAs, as they secure exchange places and facilitate administrative management. At the same time, they allow for closer collaboration tailored to the specific characteristics of each partner.

In the case of mobilities linked to large-scale projects (such as a European University Alliance), establishing an MIIA is recommended. By their very nature, alliances have already established common criteria for joint teaching and shared management, which greatly facilitates mobility dynamics.

Should any institution within the MIIA face legal and/or technical constraints that prevent joint management, a hybrid model combining an MIIA with several IIAs can be adopted.

A coexistence of MIIAs and IIAs is also recommended within alliances. In the initial phase, an MIIA provides immediate access to all partners and fosters mutual institutional awareness. Once cooperation between two specific partners consolidates, they can opt for an IIA to help optimise their specific collaboration opportunities.