

FSE+ Programme 2021-2027 of the Autonomous Province of Trento

Evaluation report on educational activities for students to promote skills development, particularly language competencies

Executive summary (EN)

Priority 2 “Education and training” – Specific Objective f) – Explanatory Action f.4)

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As part of the ESF+ 2021-2027 Programme of the Autonomous Province of Trento, three intervention strands have been funded under Priority 2, SO f), Action f.4, with the aim of strengthening students' language skills through:

- **Full immersion language mobility programme**, consisting of three-week full-immersion courses in English (in the United Kingdom, Ireland and Malta) and German (in Germany and Austria), offered during the summer to two groups of participants: "junior" students (aged 14-15) and young adults (aged 16-19);
- **Vouchers for school periods abroad**, for students enrolled in the third year of four-year upper secondary schools and in the fourth year of all other upper secondary schools;
- **International mobility programmes combining training and curricular internships** in European Union countries and the United Kingdom for upper secondary and higher vocational education students attending provincial and state-aided schools (so-called *scuole paritarie*) and training institutions in the Province of Trento. These initiatives aim to promote the learning of English and German while enhancing students' professional knowledge, skills and competences through work-based learning experiences abroad.

This thematic evaluation report examines all three measures, focusing specifically on: (i) the first three calls for proposals relating to the summer mobility programmes (2023, 2024 and 2025); (ii) the first three calls for vouchers supporting school periods abroad, covering the 2023/24, 2024/25 and 2025/26 academic years; and (iii) the two editions of the call for project proposals supporting international training and mobility placements for upper secondary and higher vocational education students, published in 2024 (edition one of June and edition two of December).

The evaluation addresses the following key questions: ► *To what extent have the interventions contributed to improving students' foreign language skills?* ► *How do participants perceive the usefulness of these initiatives in strengthening the quality and attractiveness of their educational, academic and professional portfolios?* ► *In what ways have the interventions contributed to the development and enhancement of participants' soft skills?* ► *To what extent have the interventions incorporated and promoted the horizontal principles?* ► *How coherent are these actions with other measures and instruments adopted by the Autonomous Province of Trento and at the national level in this field?* ► *Have the implementation mechanisms adopted for the intervention strands proved effective, and what lessons can be drawn for future programming?*

The **methodological approach** adopted combined a cross-cutting evaluation of the three intervention strands - allowing for a comparative assessment of the added value of each instrument - with analytical perspectives tailored to the distinctive features of each measure. The evaluation also relied on the triangulation of both sources and methods. Evidence was collected from final beneficiaries as well as from the actors involved in policy design and implementation, using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. The evaluation included a review of administrative and implementation documentation, an analysis of monitoring data, a CAWI survey addressed to all students who had completed the interventions by the time of the survey, and qualitative in-depth analyses through focus groups and interviews involving the Europe Unit UMSe Europa, the Service for Vocational Education, Tertiary Education and System Functions, schools and training institutions, the *Struttura Multifunzionale Ad Personam*, and the final beneficiaries.

The **three measures** under evaluation **target similar groups** - students enrolled in provincial schools and vocational education and training institutions, with some differences regarding the eligible years of upper secondary education - and **pursue common objectives**. These are fully consistent with the Trentino Trilingual Plan and with the Provincial Sustainable Development Strategy (SproSS), which identifies among its priorities *"the promotion and support of international*

learning experiences as a key driver of personal development and the acquisition of competences that enhance employability".

At the same time, the three measures **differ in terms of governance and implementation arrangements**. Both the full immersion language mobility programme and the school periods abroad (year or semester) operate through individual applications. However, while the former are centrally organised and managed by the *Struttura Multifunzionale Territoriale Ad Personam* acting on behalf of the Provincial Administration, in the case of vouchers for school periods abroad the province provides the vouchers, leaving all organisational decisions to students and their families. By contrast, the training scheme is based on grants awarded to schools and training institutions, which are responsible for organising and implementing both the preparatory training and the placement.

The three measures also differ in terms of participation levels, implementation performance and attractiveness. Participation in the summer mobility programmes has been consistently high and closely aligned with the targets established for each annual call. By contrast, participation in both the school-abroad voucher scheme and the training programme has remained significantly lower and below the targets set out in the respective calls. However, these results should be interpreted in the context of the wide range of similar initiatives available within the province, many of which pursue comparable objectives and target partially overlapping groups of beneficiaries.

Related to the school periods abroad, these include the scholarship scheme promoted by the Autonomous Region of Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol, the *"Fuori Classe"* programme funded by the Adamello Giudicarie Valsabbia Paganella Rural Bank, the national INPS ITACA programme, and the scholarships offered by the Caritro Foundation within the Intercultura programmes and the United World College of the Adriatic. In the case of international internships, the main alternative opportunities are provided through projects funded under Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), the Erasmus+ programme, and the M.E.T.A. - European Mobility, Traineeships and Learning project, financed under Erasmus+ 2021-2027 (Key Action 1 - VET Learner Mobility) and managed by the Autonomous Province of Trento.

Table 1 - Annual budget allocation under the Calls for proposals and committed funding by measure

Year / Academic year	Call budget allocation	Committed funding	Committed funding as a share of total allocation
Full immersion language mobility programme			
2023	1.500.000,00 €	1.227.248,13 €	82%
2024	1.700.000,00 €	1.700.000,00 €	100%
2025	1.800.000,00 €	1.800.000,00 €	100%
Vouchers for school periods abroad			
a.y. 2023/2024	500.000,00 €	247.405,33 €	49%
a.y. 2024/2025	730.000,00 €	195.110,66 €	27%
a.y. 2025/2026	600.000,00 €	231.437,00 €	39%
International mobility programmes combining training and curricular internships			
2024 - Edition 1 - Higher Vocational Education	200.000,00 €	66.603,08 €	33%
2024 - Edition 1 - Upper Secondary Education	900.000,00 €	368.407,80 €	41%
2024 - Edition 2 - Higher Vocational Education	140.000,00 €	67.906,84 €	49%
2024 - Edition 2 - Upper Secondary Education	650.000,00 €	404.053,21 €	62%

Source: *Monitoring data as of 31/12/2025*

Table 2 – Students participating by measure (reference period)

Measure	Total participants
Full immersion language mobility programme	1.686
Vouchers for school periods abroad	113
International mobility programmes combining training and curricular internships	152

Source: *Monitoring data as of 31/12/2025*

The interventions implemented across all three measures have incorporated and promoted the horizontal principles by providing additional resources to enable the participation of students with disabilities or other forms of disadvantage, including the support and assistive measures required to ensure their full participation. The call for proposals relating to the summer language immersion mobility programmes also pays particular attention to students with special educational needs throughout the assessment process, taking into account any specific learning requirements.

For the full immersion language mobility programme during summer, it was possible to quantify the overall share of participants with certified disabilities or other forms of disadvantage, including a substantial proportion of students with Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs). Across the three annual editions covered by the evaluation, 245 students - both female and male - fell within these categories, representing 14.5% of all participants. This highlights the important role of the measure in promoting inclusive participation. Particular attention is devoted to inclusion throughout every stage of the programme. Prior to departure, individual meetings with families were held to identify each student's specific needs, allowing learning pathways and support arrangements to be tailored accordingly and ensuring that participants benefit from an experience that is appropriate to their individual health, well-being and learning needs, among others.

Overall, the evaluation identified a number of significant findings relating both to the implementation of the measures and to the results achieved.

The interventions are widely recognised as having had a **highly positive impact on improving the foreign language skills of students in the Province of Trento**, although the magnitude and nature of these effects vary according to the characteristics and duration of each intervention. For the international internships and the summer language immersion programmes - both relatively short-term experiences (lasting at least 30 days and three weeks respectively) - the most evident improvements concern listening and speaking skills, together with vocabulary acquisition. By contrast, participation in school periods abroad, which last between six and twelve months, generates stronger and more comprehensive improvements, extending also to written language skills, although outcomes vary depending on the destination country.

Alongside the direct enhancement of language proficiency, **one of the most significant outcomes** of these interventions is their contribution to the **development of participants' soft skills**, an effect that emerges consistently across all three measures. In particular, participation has strengthened students' personal autonomy - especially among those experiencing independent international mobility for the first time - while also improving their ability to adapt to unfamiliar environments and situations and to interact with people from different cultural and social backgrounds. For many participants, these experiences have increased self-confidence, encouraged more effective time management and planning skills, and provided an important opportunity to step outside their comfort zones and successfully face new challenges. They have also strengthened students' willingness and readiness to undertake further international mobility experiences in the future.

Participants' perceptions of the contribution of these interventions to enhancing the quality and attractiveness of their educational, academic and professional portfolios are also positive, although less so than their assessments of the improvements in language proficiency and soft skills. This is likely to reflect the fact that many beneficiaries are still at an early stage of their educational pathways and therefore remain some distance from entering higher education or the labour market. Similarly, participants' expectations when applying for these opportunities generally focus less on their future academic or professional value than on other aspects of the experience. The professional dimension is more prominent in the case of international internships, particularly those undertaken within higher vocational education, compared with placements involving upper secondary school students.

Turning to the effectiveness of the implementation mechanisms adopted across the three intervention strands, the evidence gathered through the evaluation suggests **a number of operational recommendations for each of the ESF+-funded measures** under review.

With regard to the **summer language mobility programmes**, the evaluation recommends:

- ***Maintaining the current delivery model adopted by the Autonomous Province of Trento for short-term mobility programmes***, which provides participants with a comprehensive package of services rather than individual financial support through vouchers. This model is highly appreciated by students, facilitates access for families with fewer opportunities, and has consistently ensured a high quality of provision. The large scale of the programme also enables the Provincial Administration to benefit from economies of scale and to negotiate with host institutions from a stronger position;
- ***Continuing to invest in the quality of group leaders and accompanying staff, who are widely recognised as one of the programme's key strengths:*** Their professional preparation, availability, ability to relate to young participants and capacity to manage groups are considered essential to the overall success of the experience. Maintaining rigorous recruitment and training procedures should therefore remain a priority;
- ***Retaining the language certification component*** as a distinctive and attractive feature of the programme. Although obtaining a language certificate is not an explicit objective of the intervention, participants consistently perceive it as an important added value;
- ***Maintaining the three-week duration*** of the language immersion programmes, which is considered appropriate by the vast majority of participants;
- ***Strengthening opportunities for interaction among students of different nationalities within campuses, classes, and informal activities, wherever feasible.*** Although this aspect cannot always be directly controlled by the Provincial Administration, greater integration of students from different countries within classes, accommodation arrangements and informal activities would further enhance the immersive nature of the experience;
- ***Giving greater prominence, during the initial communication phase, to the long-term benefits of the experience***, including its contribution to students' educational pathways, personal development, future study and career choices, and increased autonomy. Preparatory meetings and promotional activities should therefore place greater emphasis not only on the experience itself but also on its lasting personal and educational value;
- ***Bringing forward the publication of the ranking lists and/or introducing greater flexibility into the organisational arrangements established by the calls for proposals***, which currently do not allow families to change either the host institution or the assigned mobility period. This would better respond to the growing need expressed by families to plan their children's summer activities well in advance.

With regard to the **vouchers supporting school periods abroad**, the evaluation recommends:

- ***Maintaining the simple and inclusive access requirements that currently characterise the ESF+-funded voucher scheme***. Unlike comparable programmes available within the province, this measure does not impose academic merit requirements. Discussions with participants indicate that, despite relatively modest implementation levels - reflected in the limited share of available funding committed - the scheme has often represented either families' preferred option and, in some cases, the only accessible opportunity given their eligibility profile. From the perspective of maximising the number of young people able to benefit from international mobility experiences, it therefore appears preferable to preserve a diversified portfolio of provincial support measures, adjusting financial allocations where necessary rather than reducing the range of available instruments;
- ***Working with schools to strengthen awareness of the educational value of international mobility***, so that these experiences are increasingly regarded as an integral part of the educational offer rather than as an interruption to it. This would help reduce the resistance that still exists among some teachers and which, in certain cases, discourages students from participating;
- ***Promoting the exchange and dissemination of good practices among schools and vocational education and training institutions, particularly with regard to operational aspects*** such as: providing information sessions to help students and families fully understand the responsibilities and implications associated with study periods abroad; support modes from Italian schools during students' stay overseas; effective reintegration strategies upon students' return; establishing learning agreements between schools, students and families, among others;
- ***Ensuring that the timing of ESF+ voucher payments to families is carefully aligned*** with the organisational schedules of study-abroad programmes.

With regard to the **international mobility programmes combining training and curricular work placements**, the evaluation recommends:

- ***Introducing organisational, management and reporting flexibility, wherever feasible.*** This could include, for example, allowing training hours to be reallocated between preparatory educational tutoring and tutoring provided during the period abroad, as well as arrangements for attendance recordsm among others;
- ***Increasing the available budget*** to reflect rising costs - particularly air travel expenses - and thereby enable schools to offer higher-quality mobility experiences to students and their families;
- ***Establishing a list of agencies "vetted" by the Province***, to be shared with teachers responsible for international internship projects. Schools could draw on this list, thereby providing greater protection for students and their families. Such a resource would also help address the current difficulties schools and training institutions face in identifying available agencies and placements that are consistent with students' educational and training pathways and with the objectives of the call for proposals;
- ***Developing a standard model of responsibility agreement*** to be adopted by all schools and vocational education and training institutions, ensuring greater protection;
- ***Setting the minimum duration of internships at four weeks, rather than the current 30 days***, in order to simplify programme organisation and avoid unnecessary additional costs;

- ***Allocating dedicated resources for accompanying staff***, particularly for upper secondary school students.

More broadly, the evaluation identifies a number of **cross-cutting considerations** relating to guidance and communication. The Province of Trento offers an **exceptionally rich and diversified range of opportunities for young people to develop their foreign language skills**. This broad offer is well aligned with the European Union's mobility targets for 2030, which aim for at least 23% of higher education graduates and at least 12% of vocational education and training learners to benefit from learning mobility opportunities. Furthermore, by 2027 the EU seeks to ensure that at least 20% of learning mobility participants are individuals with fewer opportunities. At the same time, however, such a wide range of initiatives requires strategic governance.

In this respect, it is essential both to **ensure systematic communication between the Provincial Administration and schools and vocational education and training institutions**, and to encourage the development of **more operational peer-learning networks among schools and training providers themselves**. This need emerged clearly during the focus groups conducted as part of the evaluation. Regular opportunities for dialogue and exchange would facilitate information sharing, collaborative problem-solving and the dissemination of effective practices.

Particular attention should also be devoted to improving communication with students and their families. This requires stronger coordination among the various institutions involved, with the aim of providing **clearer guidance and enabling young people and their parents** to make well-informed choices among the many available opportunities. Rather than navigating a broad but sometimes fragmented range of initiatives, students should be supported in developing a coherent language learning pathway that combines complementary mobility experiences over time into a structured educational project.

Finally, closely linked to the considerations above, the evaluation suggests introducing - where not already provided for in the calls for proposals - **additional selection points for applicants who have not previously participated in international mobility experiences**. Such an approach would further strengthen the inclusiveness and broaden access to learning mobility opportunities among the student population.