



ALMA: Aim-Learn-Master-Achieve

Active inclusion initiative for integrating disadvantaged young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) through mobility

Handbook

January 2024

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Unit G.2 – EGF, Shared Management

Contact: EMPL-ALMA@ec.europa.eu

European Commission

B-1049 Brussels

ALMA: Aim-Learn-Master-Achieve

Active inclusion initiative for integrating disadvantaged young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs) through mobility

Handbook

Disclaimer

The purpose of the ALMA Handbook is to offer practical guidance to ESF+ Managing Authorities and potential applicants interested in implementing the ALMA initiative. It is not a legal basis.

The ALMA initiative is financed by ESF+ under shared management. Hence, implementers will have to comply with the ESF+ Regulation 1057/2021¹ and the Structural Funds Regulation 1060/2021 (CPR)², which stand as legal basis of the ALMA initiative.

¹ Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+): [EUR-Lex - 32021R1057 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

² Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy: [EUR-Lex - 32021R1060 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#)

Contents

Preface	6
1. The ALMA initiative - Overview	7
2. Applicants and partners	9
2.1 Sending organisations.....	10
2.2 Receiving organisations (Transnational Partners).....	11
2.3 Agreements between sending and receiving organisations	12
3. Project structure	14
3.1 Participant recruitment & selection.....	15
3.2 Participant preparation	16
3.2.1. Learning/development plans	16
3.2.2. Preparation of the work-placement abroad.....	18
3.3 Work-related learning experience abroad	21
3.3.1. Social and cultural activities.....	22
3.3.2. Accommodation.....	22
3.3.3. Mentoring during the stay abroad	23
3.4. Follow-up.....	24
3.5. Selection of ALMA projects and award criteria	27
4. Financial support.....	29
4.1. Control and audit obligations.....	30
4.2. Simplified cost options.....	30
5. Monitoring and evaluation	34
6. ALMA Network	35
Further resources.....	36
Annex 1. Agreement between sending and hosting organisations	37

Preface

"Europe needs all of its youth. We must step up our support to those who fall into the gaps - those not in any kind of employment, education or training."

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, 2021 State of the Union address

ALMA (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve) is an active inclusion initiative to support the social empowerment of disadvantaged young people.

The objective is to help young people find their way to the job market and integrate in the society by combining support for education, vocational training or employment in their home country with a work-related learning experience in another EU Member State. Individual coaching and counselling will be offered at all stages of this initiative. The objective of ALMA is to improve the skills, knowledge and experience of these young people, but also their self-confidence.

ALMA builds on a social innovation initiative implemented first in Germany and transferred to several other Members States/regions, including through the Transnational Learning Network Mobility (TLN Mobility).

In 2021-2027, ALMA will be implemented in the context of the ESF+ programmes at national or regional level. In particular, ALMA can be implemented under the thematic concentration requirements for youth, social inclusion or social innovation and, in the latter case, the programmes would benefit from a high co-financing rate (up to 95%).

This Handbook provides practical guidance to support Member States in setting up active inclusion programmes to address disadvantaged NEETs under the ALMA initiative. It is based on the Manual developed by TLN Mobility and contains background information and examples of approaches and methods for successful implementation of mobility schemes available to NEETs.

Support is also available from the Lithuanian ESF + Agency (ESFA), which has been entrusted by the Commission to coordinate the ALMA network.

Our hope is that the ALMA initiative will now take off and benefit a large number of NEETs, allowing them to go back to education or training, or to find employment.

1. The ALMA initiative - Overview

ALMA³ (Aim-Learn-Master-Achieve) is an **active inclusion initiative** to empower vulnerable **young people aged 18 to 29 who are not in education, employment, or training (NEETs)** and who have difficulties accessing work or training for individual or structural reasons (e.g. disability, long-term unemployment, insufficient school performance or vocational skills, migration background, etc.). Member States are, however, free to include participants from the age of 15, in line with the youth employment thematic concentration (15-29 years) in the context of the ESF+⁴.

ALMA is implemented through a tailor-made approach, offering to young people counselling in their home country and a supervised work-related experience in another EU Member State. The aim is to support participants' integration into the labour market and society of their Member State of origin.

ALMA operations consist of three phases:

- **Preparation:** participants will receive intensive tailor-made training and coaching in their home country to prepare them for the stay abroad.
- **Mobility:** participants will spend 2 to 6 months in another EU Member State, integrated in a work environment.
- **Follow-up:** Upon their return, continued support will guide them to use their newly acquired skills in their Member State of origin to integrate in employment or further education.

³ ALMA initiative: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1549&langId=en>

⁴ For reporting purposes, the following categories will apply: number of children below 18 years of age; young people between 18 and 29 years of age.



For **most disadvantaged NEETs (18-29)**



A **supervised work-related learning experience abroad** in a hosting public or private structure for a period of 2 to 6 months in another EU Member State



Included in a **comprehensive project cycle** implying coaching and counselling at every step

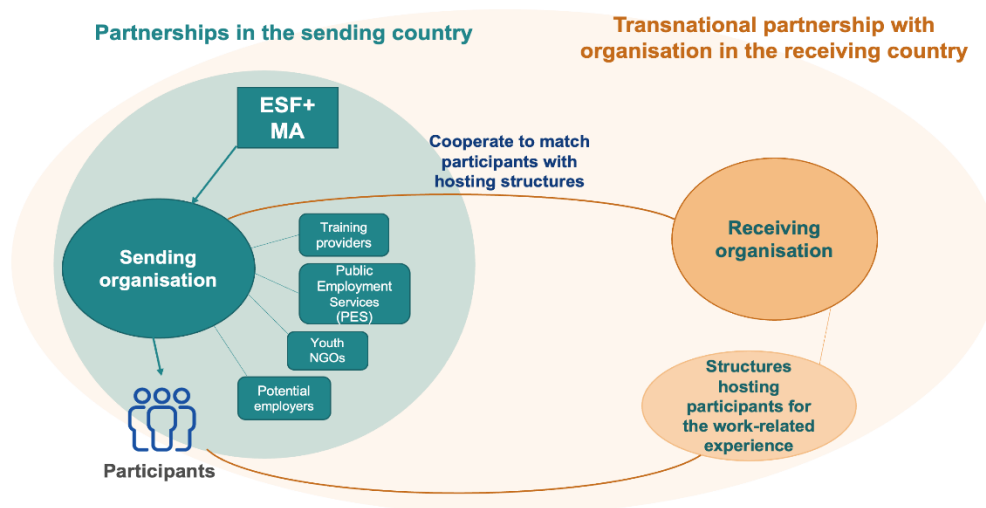
ALMA is to be implemented under national and regional 2021-2027 ESF+ Programmes, with a flexible structure, application procedure and duration.

Whereas some Member States might be inclined to plan ALMA measures over a short timeframe, past experience has shown that longer timeframes can create economies of scale. Member States new to the ALMA initiative could start by launching a pilot call for learning purposes, and then switch to a longer timeframe for the upcoming rounds of calls. Measures lasting longer periods can involve several groups, while learning and improving from their experiences. Hence, a longer timeframe ALMA measures would also allow potential changes during the time of implementation. In the past, for instance, the duration of TLN Mobility measures has varied from one to five years.

2. Applicants and partners

The ALMA initiative is implemented through transnational and local partnerships. The **sending organisation** (paragraph 2.1) in the home country is the beneficiary of the funds, in charge of setting up all the aspects concerning the preparation and follow-up phase. Meanwhile, in the host Member State the **receiving organisation** (paragraph 2.2) is in charge of all the aspects regarding the stay abroad. Therefore, the ALMA projects build up on a strong **transnational partnership** between two organisations from the involved countries, as well as on **local partnerships** (paragraph 2.1.1) ensuring the expertise and services needed for the successful outcome of the project.

Actors involved



ALMA is open to any type of organisation considered eligible by national and regional managing authorities. This includes:

- NGOs, and third-sector, voluntary and non-profit organisations
- local authorities and municipalities;
- job centres;
- employment agencies;
- vocational education and training (VET) providers;
- associations and representatives of those involved in VET;
- schools;

- companies, social partners and other representative bodies linked to the labour market, including chambers of commerce and other trade associations;
- agencies responsible for skills validation;
- lifelong-learning research centres and organisations;
- guidance, consultancy and information services linked to lifelong learning.

2.1 Sending organisations

Applications to calls for proposal launched by managing authorities at national and regional level should come from the **organisations (project operators) that will send participants abroad.**

The **sending organisation will cover all participant-related costs**, including those incurred by the receiving organisation for setting up the stay abroad.

The sending organisation is the signatory of the grant agreement with the regional or national authority. It is therefore responsible for ensuring the quality of services delivered by the receiving organisation in the hosting country.

This requires clear agreements between the sending and receiving organisations, covering all key aspects of setting up and implementing the stay abroad⁵.

It is strongly recommended that project operators who want to send participants abroad are also willing to host participants from other Member States.

Involving different actors in the home Member State for the design and implementation of transnational mobility will ensure access to the different types of expertise required. Relevant actors (such as youth organisations, job centres, social services, training providers and companies) should be involved from the beginning. Also, public employment services and job centres play an important role in the recruitment and integration of participants into employment, education, or training in many Member States.

Depending on the target group, other types of partners are needed to reach out to potential participants successfully. In Czechia, where the mobility programme addressed target groups facing multiple disadvantages (such as the Roma community, and young people from socially excluded areas and low educational backgrounds), the project operators were youth organisations, as they know the target group best through their local work.

⁵ See Annex I “Agreement between sending and hosting organisations”.

Involving potential employers from the outset ensures labour-market focus and successful placements. Employers might have preconceptions vis-à-vis young people who have fallen through the cracks. Project operators may therefore need to invest time and effort to persuade employers to give these young people a chance.

Employers should be made aware of the specific needs of the target group, and they should be offered support in case of problems and conflicts.

In the German IdA programme, it was mandatory to include companies or public institutions, as well as job centres or employment agencies. The project had to fit into the job centres' local/regional labour-market policy to make sure that there was something to offer participants when they returned from abroad. Project operators offered support to the companies in the event of difficulties, and companies felt that integrating these young people also added value in terms of corporate social responsibility.

It is up to managing authorities/implementing bodies to decide what kind of cooperation agreement is required. The sending organisation in the Member State of origin will act as project leader of the partnership. This organisation will sign the grant agreement with the managing authority, and it will be the formal grant beneficiary for implementation of the activities and financial reporting.

Although national and regional calls are aimed at sending organisations, project networks should include both sending and receiving organisations.

A distinction should be made between partners and external service providers. Whilst partners are engaged in all stages and aspects of project implementation (from planning to project implementation), external service providers provide limited goods and/or services (e.g. accommodation and travel arrangements, language courses, etc.) and play no role in project management or implementation.

2.2 Receiving organisations (Transnational Partners)

Under ALMA, all projects must establish operational partnerships with at least one transnational partner from another Member State.

The transnational partner is a receiving organisation established in another EU Member State, which is in charge of all the aspects related to the mobility phase. Hence, the

receiving organisation will have to:

- find companies/organisations available to host participants for the work-related experience.
- organise housing and living aspects for the participants.
- provide effective mentoring during the stay abroad.

Under national and regional calls, managing authorities/implementing bodies may accept either applications with a prearranged transnational partnership or with a transnational partner still to be determined.

Applications with a prearranged transnational partnership will be selected based on the quality of the project idea and prospective transnational partnership (in addition to other requirements). Managing authorities/implementing bodies will decide whether a letter of intent, a signed cooperation agreement or a joint working plan is required. The costs incurred for the search of partners before the application is submitted are not eligible for reimbursement.

Applications with a transnational partnership still to be determined will be selected on the basis of the quality of the project proposal and other requirements. Applicants will have to find at least one transnational partner willing to receive young people before moving into the implementation phase.

A **partner search database** is available on the ESFA Webpage⁶. The database includes project operators and entities that have participated in ALMA projects, or that are interested in participating in the future. The aim of this tool is to facilitate the matching between sending, receiving organisations and potential hosting companies.

2.3 Agreements between sending and receiving organisations

During the preparatory phase and project set-up, sending organisations will have to prepare and sign a written agreement with their transnational partner(s) covering all key aspects of the stay abroad.

This should include the risk of unforeseen difficulties and the steps to be taken if they arise (i.e. which partner will take what action). It is important that the support system for participants and accompanying staff abroad is clearly set out. As mentioned in section 2.1, the sending organisation is the beneficiary of the grant agreement, therefore it covers all costs for the mobility phase.

An example of the main points to be covered in the written agreement between sending and

⁶ <https://www.esf.lt/en/social-innovation-grants/esf-social-innovation-alma-call/alma-partner-search-database/1160>

receiving organisations can be found in Annex 1 of this Handbook.

Key elements of successful transnational cooperation

- Clarifying expectations (aims and objectives of the mobility project, expectations of each partner, competences, etc.).
- Developing a common view about the stay abroad/project.
- Clarifying ways of working together and steering the process (e.g. working language, communication and conflict resolution processes, number of meetings, deliverables, etc.).
- Clarifying each partner's tasks and responsibilities (staff involvement and responsibilities).
- Face-to-face meetings.

When setting up a transnational partnership, a study visit is recommended to meet representatives from the hosting organisation and see potential workplaces, the accommodation and the city. During the study visit, it is important to ask questions about each workplace, including: whether it is possible to adapt working hours and tasks; which language skills are needed; whether participants will need a uniform or protective equipment; and what support the receiving organisation offers in the event of a crisis, illness or conflict in the group of participants.

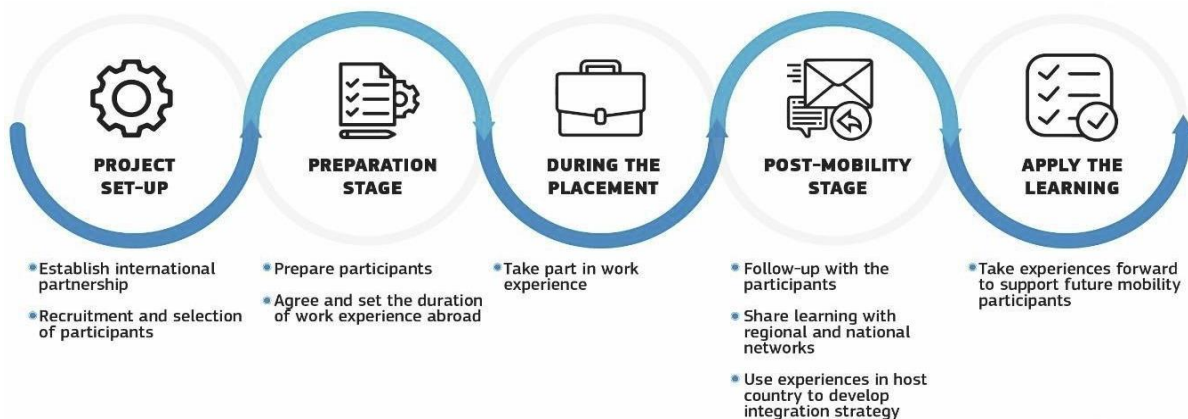
The provision of work-related placements by companies or other hosting organisations in the receiving Member State is a prerequisite. The challenges of hosting foreign interns are often outweighed by the benefits this can bring. The benefits for companies can be very diverse, from opening the workforce up to other cultures (e.g. employing people with a migration background) to developing the staff's intercultural skills.

3. Project structure

Projects under the ALMA initiative must include the following phases:

- **Participant recruitment, selection and preparation:**
 - identify people who, with the right support, will benefit from the participation to an ALMA project.
 - learning and development plans; intercultural, linguistic, professional, and practical preparation; mentoring.
- **Work-related learning experience abroad:**
 - support programme for developing non-formal skills and competences; language training; mentoring.
- **Follow-up:**
 - assessing and recording participants' progress, identifying employers that could offer a potential employment, or identify possible training and education pathways for the participants.

Project life cycle for mobility projects



All phases are interconnected and interdependent, and they must be appropriate to the target group. Well-structured and organised follow-up activities are also required after participants return from the mobility abroad, to make sure that they capitalise on the skills and attitudes they have developed.

Continuity between the phases should be ensured so that participants experience a smooth transition from the preparatory phase until their integration into education, training or employment.

Many of the young people participating in ALMA projects need **intensive support** over a long period.

3.1 Participant recruitment & selection

Young NEETs may have had negative experiences in education, training or the labour market. They often do not see themselves as 'natural' participants in mobility programmes: low levels of motivation, self-confidence and self-esteem are common issues. Potential participants may need to be motivated through tailored approaches, and it may be necessary to work through their communities to reach out potential participants.

This approach can be supported through various methods, such as: web-based tools (targeted emails, webinars, social media, etc.), open days, and informative sessions. Involving previous participants from many different backgrounds can be useful, whether through face-to-face meetings, or video or audio testimonials.

The target groups are likely to lack formal qualifications, and non-traditional selection procedures will therefore be needed to reveal their competences and potential. They might have little experience of foreign travel and lack self-reliance, so selection processes will need to identify young people who will be able to cope with a stay abroad.

In light of the needs of the target group, project operators must use participant selection methods that:

- identify people who, with the appropriate support and based on their personal motivation, will be able to benefit from participating in terms of their integration into education, vocational training and employment;
- identify people who may find foreign experiences challenging, but who, with the appropriate support, will be able to cope with a stay abroad.

Selection processes need to be carefully designed. On the one hand, they need to enable the selection of individuals who will be able to benefit from participating. On the other hand, selection processes should not filter out participants who might be regarded as 'too difficult', as this would deprive potential beneficiaries of the opportunity to participate. Providing support to vulnerable young people with great emotional and psychological needs should be an important part of selection processes.

Participant selection: key questions

- Does the participant fall into the target group? How much can the participant benefit from this experience?
- Is there potential for positive development of the person selected and can the basic objective for their integration into training/work be identified?
- Is the individual's motivation clear?
- Will the person be able to cope with difficulties in an unfamiliar and complex situation abroad? What evidence or examples can be found in their background information?
- Does the selected person fit into the overall group structure?

ALMA must conform to the horizontal principles set down by the EU. Managing authorities must reflect the objectives of **equity, non-discrimination and social responsibility** applied to both public and private actors. Actions must strive to promote gender equality and to ensure that personal and professional development opportunities are available to people with disabilities, as well as of various backgrounds.

3.2 Participant preparation

Once participants have been recruited, the intensive and well-structured preparation for the stay abroad is an important feature of successful mobility programmes for young people.

3.2.1. Learning/development plans

The project operators should review participant's competences in order to:

- work jointly with the participant to set their individual goals;
- adapt the provision to the participant's needs;
- assess the participant's progress during and after the mobility period.

The **assessment methods** described in this section could also be used in the initial selection of participants.

Assessment methods, such as written applications and interviews, are unlikely to provide a complete picture of the potential of young people coming from specific target groups, since they are not appropriate for revealing non-academic competences.

Assessment should involve discussions or guidance sessions to give participants a realistic understanding of what is involved in the stay abroad. This is likely to reveal

whether participants have the motivation to continue. In addition, methods such as self-assessment, individual profiling (e.g. using psychometric tests) and assessment days can be used.

Assessment processes should not discourage potential participants. Participants may have had negative experiences at school or with welfare benefit systems and may need encouragement.

From the outset, project operators should set out the skills and competences that participants will aim to acquire during their placements. These should be related to the main goals of mobility, whether personal (e.g. self-confidence, self-esteem, taking responsibility, reliability, perseverance and teamwork), intercultural, linguistic or professional/vocational.

The skills to be acquired should be included in **individual learning and development plans** with each participant. Learning plans should be built around placement objectives and expected learning outcomes. They should specify how the learning outcomes are to be achieved and recorded, including how broader competence development might be incorporated into work experience and work tasks. The learning plan should also specify the follow-up processes. These should address how the **skills and competences acquired are to be recognised**, for example through the **European Digital Credential**⁷ and **Europass**⁸ documentation.

Participants must be involved in developing their own learning and development plans, with support provided for people with disabilities and special needs.

A learning and development plan, adapted specifically to each participant's needs, skills and competences (including accessibility), should include:

- the objectives and intended outcomes of the participant's placement;
- the activities to be planned;
- the assessment methods that will be used.

⁷ <https://europa.eu/europass/en/stakeholders/european-digital-credentials>

⁸ <https://europa.eu/europass/en>

The value of self-assessment

Self-assessment by participants can be a highly effective component of the preparation phase. The German ESF Integration through Exchange (IdA) project has found that participants benefit from reflecting on their occupational aims (attitude, competences, direction, etc.), their identity, and their 'culture' in the broader sense. Self-awareness can also be improved through situations that introduce a sense of 'foreignness' to help them prepare for dealing with difficulties. The aim is to enable participants to see potential problems abroad as positive challenges that they can master.

The following prompts and questions have proved helpful as part of self-assessment.

- Occupational guidance and clarification:
 - Where am I going?
 - How will a work-related learning experience abroad help me?
 - What would help me to progress (wishes and compromises)?
 - Before and after assessment (current situation and expectations).

- Weighing up expectations and possibilities (ensuring that participants have a realistic vision).

- Clarifying participant's psychological situation and assistance needs.

- Identifying suitable assessment and documentation tools in collaboration with participants.

3.2.2. Preparation of the work-placement abroad

Participants need to be aware of the nature of their work-related experience in advance, for example through informative meetings.

Receiving organisations must work with local partners in the host country to make sure they understand and accept the needs of the participants. Some participants from disadvantaged backgrounds will need intensive help and support during their placement.

Some target groups might require an intensive period of preparation before they are ready to go abroad. For example, early school leavers with negative experiences and attitudes towards formal education, who have been disengaged for some years, might require significant support.

Example from an IdA project

“It was always something very special when young people from other European countries came to our retirement home. The residents felt quite honoured when people went out of their way to do work for them in our residence. Usual routines changed. And as not all residents are mobile and can travel around the world, this brought a bit of Europe to them. People talked about the countries that the young people came from. Some residents had even travelled there and were proud to discuss their experiences. There were some language barriers, so our residents had to make an effort to overcome them. You could feel a certain politeness and respect. Everyone made an effort to approach these special employees accordingly. Years later, we still recall the interns from Spain, Sweden, Slovakia and Italy. People from abroad were seen in a clearer light. This ultimately also generated sympathy and led to conversations during the refugee movement.”

Example from the Czech programme targeting vulnerable young people

The preparation phase for the Czech mobility programme had an average duration of around 115 days, with the following mandatory activities:

- participants assessments, individual interviews and counselling, and preparation of a ‘participant profile’;
- language training;
- multicultural training;
- general financial literacy training.

In addition to the mandatory activities, there was a comprehensive list of other possible activities. These had to be specified in the application along with a timetable, and chosen based on the specific needs of participants:

- language training - taking into account the level of language education achieved, as well as the specific target groups, and language education will end with an exam (format/type is not specified);
- multicultural training;
- training in labour legislation;
- vocational training;
- travel organisation (including insurance for internship participants);
- practical information and points of interest about the destination;
- other activities (equal opportunities and non-discrimination, social skills, coexisting in a group, etc.).

Preparation for the stay abroad took place in groups or individually, depending on the nature of the activity.

Example from the Slovenian programme targeting unemployed graduates

The preparation phase for the Slovenian mobility programme had a duration of around two months and involved:

- 48 hours of foreign-language training;
- 40 hours of additional programme activities covering motivation for mobility, fears and expectations related to mobility, conflict management/resolution, living and working in a host country, and questions related to finding work placements abroad;
- around 4 hours of individual mentoring.

Project operators should have a structured programme of activities ensuring that the needs of all participants are met, and that they are well prepared in terms of:

- **intercultural aspects:** helping participants to address any kind of ‘culture shock’ in advance, and to reflect on their own and foreign cultures, as well as on socio-cultural processes taking place when going to a foreign country;
- **linguistic support:** participants should have their language skills assessed before they depart and be provided with language training. The training should be provided in their home country and continue in the host country. It is likely that most participants will have little knowledge of the language of the host country. In this context, a focus on basic ‘survival’ language skills is appropriate. It will also be necessary to ensure that participants receive technical language instructions needed for their placement;
- **requirements of the professional/vocational placement:** discussing and clarifying the options open to them, and providing vocational guidance and counselling;
- **practical matters involved in travelling to and spending time in a foreign country:** travel and social security arrangements, accommodation and daily life abroad.

Former participants can play a valuable role in helping upcoming participants to prepare. For instance, former participants can be invited to share their personal experience and give advice about how to face difficulties and overcome fears.

Testimony from an IdA project operator

The transnational partner visited the sending organisation to help in the preparation of the participants. The partner held individual interviews covering participants' curriculum vitae, motivation, language proficiency, career goals and preferred type of accommodation. A two-day group information meeting was held at the employment agency, including both formal and informal elements. The whole meeting was carried out in multiple languages, with an English introduction and other languages for the individual discussions. This approach allowed the participants to familiarize with the host organisation's staff and environment even before the mobility phase, which was considered very useful.

Experiences from TLN programmes have shown that language is not an obstacle, but an asset. Limited language skills are enough if participants are open to make mistakes. When participants are abroad, they develop foreign-language and communication skills to manage and find their bearings in a foreign language and culture.

People with **particular accessibility needs**, such as those with disabilities, should have their needs assessed so that preparatory activities can be adapted accordingly. This applies, for example, to practical matters such as using public transport, the kind of accommodation they will have in the host Member State, as well as the workplaces in which they will be placed.

3.3 Work-related learning experience abroad

After the preparation phase, the young participants go abroad for a work-related experience in a public or private entity in another EU Member State. Along with acquiring work-related skills, the goal of the stay abroad is to help the participants to develop positive attitudes and behaviours, which can take time.

Being a key component of the project, the mobility abroad must last from **2 to 6 months**.

As for other elements, the duration of the mobility abroad should be tailored to the needs

of the target group. Ideally, this phase should represent 30% of the ALMA project⁹.

Moreover, the participants should **go abroad in groups** – if possible of 8 to 12 people – to ensure that they can support each other during this challenging experience.

3.3.1. Social and cultural activities

For successful stays abroad, cultural and social activities that provide opportunities for participants to socialise with local people of the same age are an important part of the project.

The participants can develop a range of competences related to employability and personal development, including the ability to socialise with people with different backgrounds and languages. These competences could help to boost their self-confidence.

Testimony from a Czech participant

“I am happy that I was able to complete such an internship. It was not just about the work experience. I also learned how to overcome stress better. And my life experience tells me that only what you accomplish on your own is really yours. I have known that for a long time, but this time I really learned that I can actually put it into practice. If I can also indulge in a little self-praise, let me say that I have very high standards for myself. I have now learned that not only do you have to work hard, but you also need to put in a certain amount of time to get everything done. And then the German. From nothing to a good little basis. For someone else that is nothing, but for me it is a great success.”

3.3.2. Accommodation

The type of accommodation should be tailored to the participant’s needs, and it can concern several options: hotel/hostel, host family, flat-sharing, etc. In particular, the flat-sharing option would allow participants to observe different lifestyles and foster self-reliance.

⁹ The 30% does not imply that each participant must spend at least 30% of its ALMA experience abroad. The percentage refers to the overall project carried out by the project operators.

Testimony from an IdA participant

“During our stay abroad, we stayed in a shared flat where we felt very comfortable. That enhanced our sense of community and we were able to practice tolerance and conflict management as a result of individual conflicts among ‘foreign’ personalities. Other alternatives were available, such as accommodation in guesthouses or with host parents. We had the impression that those in charge had made an effort to choose the right accommodation for individuals or groups and taken into account our individual needs.”

3.3.3. Mentoring during the stay abroad

Participants will need support throughout their stay abroad to enable them to achieve their objectives and provide opportunities to reflect on their progress. Day-to-day issues, homesickness and other problems can overshadow core learning issues.

The ratio of mentors to participants should be in line with the needs of the group involved, as some groups will need more support than others.

The mentor needs to build up trust with participants, demonstrating understanding of participants’ background, aspirations, and fears. Support from the mentor should be provided from the start, right through to the end of the placement and, in some cases, even beyond.

Regular meetings should be held between mentors and participants and scheduled in advance.

It is important that mentors provide feedback on participants to project operators so that there is a record of the progress made, the challenges overcome or unresolved, etc.

The division of responsibilities between home and host mentors will vary according to the circumstances.

The experience suggests that mentors from the home country should travel with participants to the host Member State to help them to adjust. Especially vulnerable target groups should be accompanied by a mentor who speaks both their language and the language of the host country. Some target groups with particularly challenging needs (e.g. disabilities) may require the support of people to accompany them, in addition to mentors.

Experiences from TLN programmes

Different approaches were taken in TLN programmes depending on the target group.

In Czechia, as the target group had multiple disadvantages, the call specified that the mentor would accompany participants for the entire stay abroad:

'During the placement abroad, the beneficiary will ensure a permanent presence of at least one person with knowledge of the Czech language and the language of the destination country, or English. The person must be from the project implementation team (either from the beneficiary or from a Czech partner).'

In Germany and Poland, where there was a similar target group, it was highly recommended that a mentor from the sending project should accompany the group during the stay abroad. For Poland, it worked well to maintain regular contact between participants and the Polish mentor using online tools.

In Catalonia, Slovenia and Sweden the requirements were less restrictive, since the target groups needed minor support.

3.4. Follow-up

After the work-related learning experience abroad, the follow-up phase aims at preparing participants for integration into education, training or employment, taking advantage of the knowledge, skills and competences developed during their experience abroad.

Support to be provided by project operators to participants after the stay abroad should include:

- support and guidance to identify and reflect on the competences they have developed and use them to support their next steps into education, training or work;
- an implementation plan for each participant setting out how they will be integrated into further education, vocational training or employment;
- specific support and guidance for job applications, or for identifying education/training pathways. This may last for many months, until participants are successfully integrated into employment, education or training;
- ensuring that, if they do not find education, vocational training or employment within the time limits of ESF-funded support, they are passed on to the appropriate support agencies that can support them further (e.g. PES).

Testimony from a Czech participant

“Thanks to the stay abroad, I learned that I can achieve more in my life! I didn’t expect to be able to handle the whole stay without my family. I overcame that and succeeded. I don’t regret going. I have become self-sufficient. I manage my own budget. I can take care of myself on my own. After returning from abroad, I felt I needed more support. I suddenly saw what another life could look like. Now I have a real job for a year, as an assistant. After that, I will possibly go to a technical school.”

Participants’ development should be measured and recorded. This enables them to identify the skills and competences they have developed and use them to support their next steps into education, training or work.

German survey of IdA participants

Together with the project networks and the participant job centres and/or employment agencies, the Federal Labour Ministry developed a questionnaire to ascertain integration outcomes. The questionnaire addressed project-implementation agencies, job centres and employment agencies, and included questions on the assessment of personal, social and occupational competences, maturity to choose an occupation, and the successful integration of IdA participants.

The assessment showed a remarkable gain in the social competences (motivation/self-reliance, self-confidence/self-esteem, appearance, behaviour and social skills) of IdA participants after the mobility phase.

To reflect on their experiences, participants should be able to discuss with a counsellor their future career or educational path already during their stay abroad. The discussions should evaluate the mobility period against the learning plan, and to look forward to how to find employment or educational/training programmes by drawing on the acquired competences. The counsellor should be able to draw on evidence from all of the organisations and individuals involved in the participant's stay abroad, including the host employer.

Common profiling methods are often not suitable for disadvantaged groups. These target groups should be evaluated according to the perspective of ‘distance travelled’, meaning what progress participants have made towards sustainable employment as a result of the mobility abroad. This progress could be an increase in self-confidence and self-efficacy, positive learning behaviours and attitudes, or social competencies.

There are several tools to measure these soft skills, such as My Journey (developed by Pobal for the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) in Ireland) and Talent Match (developed by the National Lottery Community Fund in the United Kingdom).

My Journey tool developed by Pobal for SICAP in Ireland

My Journey is a ‘distance travelled’ tool measuring soft skills that are relevant to employment, education and personal development for service users engaging with SICAP (a national social-inclusion programme that supports disadvantaged individuals and communities). The need to consult local service providers throughout its development was stressed from the start, as this can help to identify and address the target group’s barriers and support needs. In this context, the My Journey tool measures five soft-skill areas:

- confidence in literacy and numeracy;
- confidence, goal-setting and self-efficacy;
- connection with others;
- communication skills (including self-advocacy);
- general work readiness.

The tool itself is a quick and easy questionnaire with 27 questions that are suitable for anyone aged 15 or over. It can be used in individual or group settings, and it is designed for repeated use to identify what has changed over several months.

My Journey puts the person at the centre and empowers her/him, through a strengths-based approach. It encourages the user to self-reflect and gain a better understanding of their strengths and areas they would like to work on.

The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), which has been adopted at EU level, provides a useful set of principles for validating competences obtained through stays abroad against qualifications¹⁰.

¹⁰ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/projects/european-credit-system-vocational-education-and-training-ecvet#:~:text=ECVET%20allows%20learners%20to%20accumulate,their%20own%20country%20and%20abroad.>

Key elements of sending projects to be taken into account during the follow-up phase

- Work with participants to identify the progress they have made in comparison to their initial baseline.
- Provide an accurate evaluation of participants' potential to integrate into education, vocational training, and employment.
- Recognise and validate participants' achievements to enhance their prospects of integration, where possible in relation to national qualifications using the ECVET principles, and the European Digital Credential and Europass mobility documentation.
- Involve all relevant organisations and individuals in assessing participants' progress, including the sending and hosting organisations, employers and participants.

3.5. Selection of ALMA projects and award criteria

Managing authorities should include the following **criteria** in the call for proposals:

- The sending and receiving organisations provide multiskilled teams appropriate to the needs of the target group;
- Detailed outreach methods are in place for targeting and selecting participants;
- Support mechanisms are in place for participants across all phases of the mobility project;
- An activities programme tailored to the target group's needs is in place;
- Staff from the sending organisations should have adequate language abilities, in order to assist participants in all aspects of their mobility;
- Optional: Experience of mobility or ESF+ funding within the partnership, at least in the hosting organisation.

Applicants should be requested to demonstrate their experience of working with vulnerable young people and provide details on:

- How they will reach out to, engage, and recruit their target group. For example, applicants need to explain how they will involve potential participants who do not have access to computers or lack literacy skills;
- How they will deliver preparation activities to the participants, adjusting them to the target group's specific needs (e.g. organising evening sessions, pitching lessons at their level of understanding or using trained tutors to deliver training);
- Arrangements and back-up plans for replacing dropout participants before the mobility phase;

- Arrangements and back-up plans to help participants who drop out during the project;
- How they will bring peer groups together before the mobility phase (i.e., face to face and/or virtually);
- Support for participants through mentoring during the mobility phase, protocols for emergency situations, and in cases of participants dropping out during the mobility;
- Follow-up with participants after completion of the mobility phase and their return back home.

In addition to criteria for applicants and partners, mobility projects aimed at disadvantaged youth and young adults require a particular focus on skilled staff. Staff from project operators should have experience and the skills needed to deal with disadvantaged youth and the special needs of this particular target group.

Besides project management and coordination, the project operators' staff should have social, psycho-pedagogical, mentoring, intercultural and linguistic skills.

It is recommended that managing authorities list a minimum set of staff skills and professional profiles in their calls and reflect them in the award criteria for the selection of project proposals.

4. Financial support

Under ALMA, expenses for activities regarding the following project phases are eligible:

- Preparation;
- Mobility;
- Follow-up.

Expenditures can be divided into the following categories:

- Costs related to the individual participant (e.g. for travel, accommodation, subsistence, insurance and social security).
- Costs related to pedagogical and labour-market interventions (e.g. for recruitment, preparation, supervision, placement search, debriefing and (re)integration into the labour market, education or training programmes).
- Costs related to the organisational set-up (e.g. for partner search, project preparation, management during project implementation, meetings, administration, expert advice and consultancy, translation and interpretation, and hire of facilities).

When working with disadvantaged young people, the nature and scope of pedagogical and labour-market interventions vary widely depending on the target group. To cater for different types of groups, more specific rules on the exact type and nature of eligible costs in the different phases need to be established by the national and regional authorities in charge of launching national or regional calls.

Catering to specific needs of the target group

Within the framework of the Integration through Exchange (IdA) programme, six young single mothers were sent on a work placement scheme in Spain. Since their children could not be left home for an extended period of time, they travelled with their mothers to Spain and stayed for the entire duration of the project. This led to extra costs for the organisers: babysitting during the mothers' working hours, expenses associated with the children attending Spanish nursery, accommodation and other various activities.

4.1. Control and audit obligations

Under ALMA, the sending organisation carries all costs associated with activities for the participants, irrespective of whether they are incurred in the home or host Member State. This is due to the fact that expected project's outcomes have to be in line with the objectives of the sending Member State's ESF+ programme. This means that the management, control and audit obligations remain within the sending country, and project operators in the sending country need to make sure that national audit requirements are met when using services abroad.

Managing authorities should ensure that project operators are aware of any differences in accounting procedures of their own country and partner country, to avoid problems when the final statement is made.

4.2. Simplified cost options

In light of the administrative challenges in accounting real costs incurred in the context of ALMA, it is strongly recommended to use the **EU-level Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) for transnational mobility programmes for disadvantaged youth**. Simplified cost options set in the CPR of the ESF+ Regulation may be used (flat rates, lump sums and standard unit costs). Alternatively, Managing Authorities can develop their own model of SCOs. These tools must be calculated using a methodology that is fair, equitable and verifiable. They may be either based on statistical data or historical practices (including experiences with SCOs applied in other EU programmes), or on similar types of operations and beneficiaries.

TLN programmes used a mix of real costs and SCOs

In TLN programmes, different financial arrangements were used depending on the financial regulations in each country. While Czechia used a real-cost principle, other TLN members such as Catalonia, Germany, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden used a combination of real costs and SCOs. Germany, for instance, used real costs for salaries, three different unit costs for the stay abroad, and a flat rate for administration.

To support the implementation of ALMA operations under the ESF+, the Commission has defined EU-level SCOs and 'Financing not linked to cost' (FNLC) schemes in a **Delegated**

Act¹¹.

The calculation of these EU-level SCOs developed for transnational mobility is based on historical data, good practices from five TLN Mobility programmes and extrapolation¹². They cover activities associated with organising and implementing transnational mobility programmes for disadvantaged youth in the following three phases:

Preparatory phase:

- joint and individual preparatory activities, including briefing participants in their home country before the mobility phase.

Mobility phase (30% of the ALMA project¹³):

- training and pedagogical programme for participants in the host Member State;
- social and cultural activities during their stay abroad;
- support and monitoring of participants by the hosting organisation or accompanying staff.

Follow-up phase:

- support and monitoring of participants after the mobility phase, including counselling and professional guidance.

The amounts defined in the Delegated Act do not cover costs related to the partner search and preparation of partnership agreements. However, if required, any such costs may constitute eligible expenditure and be reimbursed additionally through other forms of funding¹⁴.

The Delegated Act defines the following unit costs and top-up amounts to accommodate specific requirements and circumstances:

¹¹ [EUR-Lex - 32022R2175 - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](#).

¹² The amounts and conditions set in the delegated act are based on the study: **'Simplified cost options' and 'Financing not linked to costs' in the area of social inclusion and youth: a study complementing the ESF+ impact assessment:** <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8429&furtherPubs=yes>.

¹³ When using the Simplified Cost Option defined under the Delegated Act, the 30% mobility abroad is a mandatory requirement. When using other financial tools, it is not mandatory but suggested.

¹⁴ For example, in the ALMA call at EU level (<https://www.esf.it/en/social-innovation-grants/esf-social-innovation-agma-call/call-documents/1087>) the costs incurred during the Start-up phase – phase dedicated to the creation of partnerships – were covered through a lump-sum established during the assessment of the application, based on the draft budget submitted and linked to the work packages.

Unit costs per participant

This amount covers all of the costs of implementing the ALMA operation. It is set per days of participation, for the Member States where the preparation and follow-up phases take place. It covers all three phases of an operation (preparation, mobility and follow-up)¹⁵.

These amounts are based on historic data from 5 Member States¹⁶ (Czechia, Germany, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden) and extrapolation¹⁷ for the remaining Member States.

Top-up amounts for mobility to a Member State with higher living costs

This compensates for the additional costs for the mobility to a Member State with higher living costs than the home country. These amounts are added to the unit cost per participant for the days spent abroad during the mobility phase.

Top-up amounts to ensure a decent standard of living

This top-up aims to ensure that participants enjoy a decent standard of living while participating to an ALMA project. Although participants in some Member States are entitled to financial support (such as minimum income, unemployment benefits or other social support), depending on their individual situation, this is not the case for all Member States. The managing authority may therefore decide to apply this top-up¹⁸, depending on the situation in the respective Member State and the needs of individual participants. The amounts correspond to the national poverty threshold for single persons, meaning that it is the minimum income level below which people are considered to be living in poverty. This support shall be paid directly to the respective participants in form of daily allowance.

The assessment and decision on whether to apply this top-up are entirely at the managing authority's discretion.

This top-up can be applied to one, two or all three phases of the operation. For the mobility phase, the amount of the destination country applies.

These amounts are only eligible if they are paid in full to the respective participant(s).

Top-up amounts for successful participants

This top-up amount is meant to create an incentive for project operators to increase their efforts in supporting the success of young people in exiting the ALMA project¹⁹. A successful

¹⁵ The basic unit costs per day are established in Table 1 of the Delegated Act.

¹⁶ Aggregated data of all projects funded through the Coordinated Call of the TLN Mobility Network covering total costs, duration of activities as well as on the number of participants entering the programme.

¹⁷ Unit costs for the other countries than the 5 with historic data were extrapolated using a statistical model, drawing on indicators for GDP per capita in purchasing power standards, comparative price levels and employment rate data as predictor variables.

¹⁸ The daily top-up for participants that receive an allowance from the beneficiary are established under table 5 of the Delegated Act.

¹⁹ The Delegated Act refers to "exiting the ALMA operation".

exit (i.e. the result to be achieved) is to be understood as leading to a positive change in the participant's occupational status, such as finding employment, enrolling or re-entering training, education or a labour market programme within 6 months after exiting the ALMA project. This focus on softer outcomes and the broad definition of "positive results" reduces the risk of disadvantaging more vulnerable participants.

The amounts are due in addition to the basic unit cost per participant. They constitute eligible expenditure for each participant successfully exiting the project²⁰.

²⁰ The daily top-up for successful participants according to the Member State where the preparatory phase takes place are established under table 6 of the Delegated Act.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are essential tools for project operators to keep track of progress among participants, and to understand the overall impact of activities. Monitoring and evaluation activities should be integrated at early stage and include the perspectives of all key actors. Methods should be in place, such as regular meetings to discuss practical aspects and potential problems, and weekly reports on activities and achievements.

An example of evaluation from the Czech programme is shown in the box below.

Evaluation of the Czech mobility programme

The evaluation of the Czech mobility programme took place on two levels: project level and call level.

- **Project evaluation:** During project implementation, beneficiaries asked for ongoing feedbacks, based on which to adjust activities. For this reason, the beneficiaries had the opportunity to implement project evaluation as a key and separate activity. Although the outputs of the evaluations primarily served for the beneficiaries, they were also passed to the managing authority.
- **Call evaluation:** To evaluate the call as a whole, the managing authority carried out an overall evaluation. Beneficiaries were required to cooperate with data collection as part of this by collecting questionnaires from participants at the following phases:
 - When entering the project;
 - Immediately after the mobility abroad;
 - 4-5 months after the mobility abroad, but no later than the end of the project.

To induce participants to fill out the final questionnaires, the managing authorities offered them a fee for completing it. The aim of this questionnaire was to investigate the participants' situation after their participation to the project. The data obtained through the questionnaire was also used by the beneficiary for self-evaluation purposes.

6. ALMA Network

The ALMA Network is a network of ESF+ Managing Authorities and Implementing Bodies at national and regional levels, that are currently implementing or planning to implement ALMA measures under their ESF+ Programmes 2021-2027. The aim of the network is to support Member States and regions to implement ALMA projects.

The Network activities focus on:

- Coordination and practical support for launching and implementing ALMA calls (e.g. discuss the planning and drafting of calls, share good practices, etc.);
- Work on specific and cross cutting topics to ensure the high quality and further development of ALMA projects (e.g. measuring soft outcomes/ soft indicators, taking forward SCOs, etc.);
- Information sessions about the state of play regarding ALMA projects.

The ALMA Network is coordinated by the European Competence Centre for Social Innovation (EUCCSI) Initiative which is located at the European Social Fund Agency (ESFA) in Lithuania.

Website: <https://www.esf.lt/en>

Email: ALMA@esf.lt

Further resources

- “ALMA: an active inclusion initiative for young people”, European Commission. Available at:
<https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1549&langId=en>
- “Learning from experience: integrating disadvantaged young people through mobility schemes”, European Commission (2022). Available at:
<https://ec.europa.eu/european-social-fund-plus/en/publications>
- Resources from the webinar on “ALMA and Supporting disadvantaged young people to take part in mobility under ESF+” (2021). Available at:
<https://ec.europa.eu/european-social-fund-plus/en/transnational-cooperation-platform>
- IdA-Brochure “Unlocking potential: a manual for successful transnational work with disadvantaged target groups”, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Germany (2021). Available at:
https://www.esf.de/portal/SharedDocs/Publikationen/EN/37948e_ida_unlocking_potential.html
- “Simplified Cost Options and “Financing not linked to costs” in the Area of social inclusion and youth: A study complementing the ESF+ impact assessment”, European Commission (2021). Available at:
<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/5175a20b-3ac3-11ec-89db-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

Annex 1. Agreement between sending and hosting organisations

The following key issues should be covered in a written agreement between the sending organisation and the hosting organisation:

- The types of participants to be involved and their needs in relation to their stay abroad;
- How mentors appointed by each organisation will work together;
- The structure and content of the mobility activities before the placements take place. This includes intercultural and linguistic activities, the professional/vocational placement, practical matters related to travelling to the host Member State, and team building and soft-skills development;
- The level of language skills that participants must have, so that there is a shared understanding of their language needs and adequate support;
- How participants' achievements will be assessed, recognized and validated, including initial baselining;
- Cooperation with hosting organisations in all phases:
 - o In the preparation phase: hosting organisations should receive information in advance of placements, so that they are fully acquainted with participants' profiles and can take part in handover discussions;
 - o For the stay abroad: hosting project operators should be involved in organising the professional/vocational placements, working closely with local organisations and companies to identify suitable placements. Hosting project operators should also be involved in organising cultural activities, language trainings, and in providing mentoring and tutoring;
 - o In the follow-up phase: hosting organisations should be involved in participants' assessments;
- The risk that might be encountered and how they would be addressed, including procedures for dealing with conflicts (e.g. using a risk management plan);
- How equal opportunities and non-discrimination principle will be upheld (e.g. the provision of reasonable accommodation and accessibility for disabled participants);
- How regular effective communication with hosting organisations and partners, especially PES, will be set up and maintained;
- Financial arrangements.