# THE NEW KIDS OF THE BLOCK: SERVICE DESIGN STRATEGIES AND INNOVATIONS

## A Case Study: Dive Deep into SDSI

> "*I had this a-ha moment during a workshop conducted in Tallinn by the Estonian Academy of Arts, during which we had the opportunity to work in a real hospital with real service design challenges – and realised that I have the toolset and I'm well-prepared for different challenges, knowing the background, methodology and having real skills to overcome complicated obstacles.*" – Yevheniia Kyrylenko

Erasmus Mundus programmes are diverse, with more joining every year to contribute to international collaborative higher education and create new value for students worldwide. In this dynamic and changing landscape, a joint venture between the Art Academy of Latvia, the University of Lapland, the Estonian Academy of Arts, and the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga is one of the newest Erasmus Mundus consortia, reshaping the way we think about service design, management, and leadership.

## Programme origins

The concept of Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree Service Design Strategies and Innovations (SDSI) was born in 2017 and it received the Erasmus Mundus grant in 2022, with the Art Academy of Latvia taking the lead. SDSI is not meant to be simply an academic programme; it is a mission to educate and empower individuals to reimagine and reshape societal structures through service design. With a history stretching back 20-30 years in Europe, service design is not a new concept, but its application in the Baltic states represents a novel approach to addressing societal needs. The programme's curriculum integrates creativity, design thinking, and a strong foundation in business and management, ensuring graduates are well-equipped to lead large-scale service design projects.

While it wasn't easy for Ilze Supe, the programme's sales and development director, to find the right partners and navigate the complexities of international degrees, those challenges were overcome with perseverance and dedication. Now, each partner in the consortium brings unique strengths to SDSI. The University of Lapland is renowned for its service design expertise, particularly its technology hub, which allows for immersive, practical learning experiences. The Estonian Academy of Arts contributes a strong focus on sustainable transitions and systematic thinking, encouraging students to consider broader societal challenges such as climate change

and public service improvement. The Stockholm School of Economics in Riga contributes critical business and management knowledge, essential for nurturing leaders in service design.

## Unique strengths and impacts of the programme

Krista Korpikoski from the University of Lapland highlights practical and strategic aspects of the curriculum as one of the strongest aspects of the programme, including digital and strategic service design courses and real-world design projects with companies. The programme is collaborating with local industries, for example, students are working directly with the Riga Airport. During projects with the airport the students address real-world service challenges, a collaboration that includes industry visits, problem pitches, and regular feedback sessions which gives students hands-on experience and prepares students for future challenges, but also brings a fresh global perspective to the Riga Airport and its service development.

The Estonian Academy of Arts brings the unique perspective of Estonia as a digital nation to the programme, as the Academy contributes significantly to the programme in the realms of digitalisation and sustainability. These areas are not only central to the academy's ethos but also crucial in shaping the future of service design, as stated by Ruth-Helene Melioranski, the Dean of the Design Faculty at the Estonian Academy of Arts.

> *"Estonia as a 'digital nation' offers students a unique opportunity to experience and learn from its advanced digital public services. This approach not only enriches the student's learning experience but also prepares them to envision and implement innovative service design strategies in a rapidly evolving digital landscape."* – Ruth-Helene Melioranski, Estonian Academy of Arts

The SDSI programme's international students have a profound impact on the local communities they engage with, as observed by the programme coordinators. Many students are learning the local language - out of a class of 32, about 16 students are already studying or interested in studying Latvian. The eagerness to embrace local culture also extends beyond the classroom with students participating actively in external projects and activities, practicing their language skills and fostering positive interactions with local people.

## Challenges and learnings

Integrating all those different universities and perspectives wasn't without challenges. One significant hurdle was navigating the diverse national regulations regarding joint programmes, with the accreditation process, particularly in Latvia, being especially complex and demanding.

Marja Ylioinas, working in student administration at the University of Lapland, also points out the operational challenges, such as managing the increased workload due to a higher number of students following the Erasmus Mundus funding, outlining the strong brand value of Erasmus Mundus.

Karolina Lehtma, the local programme coordinator at the Estonian Academy of Arts, notes the unique challenges and learning opportunities that come with coordinating an international programme like SDSI, especially in terms of integrating different educational cultures and approaches – and emphasises the importance of flexibility and adaptability in managing such a diverse and dynamic consortium.

Another challenge has been addressing the diverse needs of an international student body. The programme has responded by providing tailored student services, including psychological support and cultural integration activities, ensuring a supportive and inclusive environment for all students.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the SDSI programme, as highlighted by Ilze Supe, is its commitment to geographical diversity. This diversity not only brings an array of cultural nights and food tastings but also presents unique challenges. Ilze notes recent feedback from students, which pointed out a tendency to glorify European culture in lecture materials. This observation has been a crucial learning point for the faculty and staff, underscoring the importance of being sensitive and inclusive in their approach to education. It's a two-way educational journey, where not only are the students learning, but the programme team and consortium are also evolving, constantly adapting to ensure a respectful and truly global learning environment.
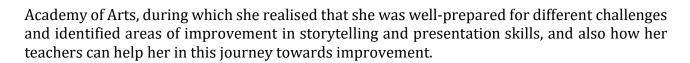
"Overcoming all those operational challenges of the programme requires regular coordination meetings and the development of joint guidelines and documents, which are crucial for harmonising the diverse educational and administrative systems of the partner universities. It is important to be adaptable and plan strategically to meet not only the current educational standards but also remain agile enough to evolve with changing societal and technological trends." – Ruth-Helene Melioranski, Estonian Academy of Arts

## Highlighting student experience

Yevheniia Kyrylenko, a current student from Ukraine, was drawn to the programme through a Facebook community post. With the service design concept being in the early stages in Ukraine, she already had participated in several workshops on service design and was looking to expand her knowledge in this topic. With previous experience in multinational companies, during her studies, she has improved her knowledge in service design, presentation, and organising workshops and events. She remembers fondly a workshop conducted in Tallinn by the Estonian

Academy of Arts, during which she realised that she was well-prepared for different challenges and identified areas of improvement in storytelling and presentation skills, and also how her teachers can help her in this journey towards improvement.

Yevheniia also identifies room for development in coordination and cooperation between the consortia, highlighting the importance of regular consultation sessions with the students, and real action being implemented as a result of student feedback, something that the consortia is very open to doing.

Yevheniia is confident she made the correct choice in selecting SDSI – that she will put her learnings to good use, that she sees the team behind the consortia loves what they are doing – and that they are preparing her well for the future and career in service design, the invaluable view coming from a student.

## Key learnings and recommendations

For institutions aspiring to create their own Erasmus Mundus consortium, Ilze Supe emphasises several key factors for success:

- Firstly, it's crucial to **clearly define the programme's unique selling points**. This involves thorough research and identifying a niche that sets the programme apart in the educational landscape. For instance, the SDSI's distinct focus on 'lead of service design' was shaped by aligning with professional standards from the United Kingdom, ensuring both relevance and uniqueness.
- Secondly, **the importance of a dedicated and enthusiastic project leader cannot be overstated**. The role demands a high level of personal commitment and involvement, often extending beyond regular working hours, to ensure that timelines and objectives are met.
- Thirdly, **maintaining open and continuous communication** within the team is vital. This approach fosters a sense of belonging and family among team members, which is instrumental in overcoming challenges and ensuring everyone is committed to the programme's success.

These three pillars – a well-defined unique selling point, a committed leader, and a cohesive, communicative team – are fundamental for any university aspiring to launch a successful Erasmus Mundus consortium, based on the experience of the SDSI staff.

## Final notes

The SDSI consortium's experience offers valuable lessons for other Erasmus Mundus programmes and stakeholders. Being a new consortium, its success underscores the effectiveness of diverse, multi-institutional collaborations in addressing contemporary educational challenges. It highlights the importance of clear objectives, strong coordination, and inclusive practices in developing impactful educational programs and as it continues to evolve, it serves as a practical example of how cooperation and adaptability are key to creating successful, forward-thinking academic partnerships.

For more information on the SDSI programme, please visit the SDSI website: https://www.sdsi.ma/.