

## **SMILE Project Holds In-Person Kick-Off Meeting and Co-Creation Workshop in Ankara**

**Ankara, Türkiye, 7–10 April 2026**

The consortium of the **SMILE project – Supporting Mobility and Internationalization for Learning and Engagement in Somali HEIs (Project Ref. No. 101237721)** successfully held its first **in-person Kick-Off Meeting** and **Co-Creation Workshop** in Ankara, Türkiye, from **7 to 10 April 2026**, hosted by **Middle East Technical University (METU)**.

Co-funded by the **European Union** under the **Erasmus+ Programme**, action **Capacity Building in the Field of Higher Education (CBHE)**, SMILE is a 36-month project aimed at strengthening the internationalization capacities of Somali higher education institutions through mobility, institutional cooperation, inclusion, and digital approaches to international learning.

The Ankara meeting marked an important milestone in the project lifecycle. Following the Virtual Kick-Off Meeting held in January 2026, the in-person event enabled Somali and European partners to meet face to face for the first time, review progress achieved during the first months of implementation, and move from project launch to the first operational phase of activities.

The first day of the meeting was dedicated to **consortium coordination and project management**. Partners reviewed the status of project implementation after the first three months, including coordination activities, signed partnership agreements, first financial transfers, communication arrangements, and preparation of upcoming deliverables. Discussions also addressed key implementation priorities for the first year, dissemination planning, quality assurance, and reporting procedures.

The following three days were dedicated to the **Work Package 2 Co-Creation Workshop**, a central activity of the project's capacity-building component. The workshop brought together Somali and European partners in a highly interactive format designed to refine the training priorities and methodologies that will guide WP2 implementation.

The workshop focused on the five core training areas of the project:

- **Staff mobility**
- **Virtual mobility**
- **Private sector engagement**
- **Inclusion strategies**
- **Academic collaboration**

During the co-creation sessions, Somali partner institutions actively shared their institutional realities, priorities, and challenges, while European partners contributed examples of practices, facilitation, and technical expertise. Through plenary exchanges, thematic

discussions, and World Café group work, the workshop helped confirm and update the needs analysis carried out during the project preparation phase and provided a shared basis for the further design of training activities.

The active involvement of the **Somali organizations** was particularly important throughout the event. Their contributions ensured that the discussions remained grounded in institutional realities and that the future training activities under WP2 will respond to actual needs and opportunities within Somali higher education. At the same time, the **European partners** played a key facilitation role by supporting reflection, sharing practical experience, and helping structure the outcomes of the workshop into a coherent framework for implementation.

The SMILE consortium brings together eight partners from Somalia and Europe:

- **Horseed International University (Somalia)** – Coordinator
- **Baidoa International University (Somalia)**
- **Plasma University (Somalia)**
- **Somali Education and Youth Development Action – SOEYDA (Somalia)**
- **Middle East Technical University – METU (Türkiye)**
- **University of Piraeus / University of Piraeus Research Center (Greece)**
- **European Society for Socio Economic Integration – ESSEI (Belgium)**
- **European Association of Erasmus Coordinators – EAEC (Cyprus)**

The meeting in Ankara reinforced the collaborative spirit of the consortium and created strong momentum for the next phase of the project. The outcomes of the workshop will feed directly into the **Co-Creation Workshop Report** and support the preparation of subsequent WP2 training activities, practical training visits, and the broader internationalization work to be developed under the SMILE project.

Through its work plan, SMILE seeks to support Somali higher education institutions in building stronger international partnerships, developing more inclusive and innovative internationalization strategies, and expanding opportunities for academic mobility and global engagement.



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