

## SUMMARY

The RURASMUS initiative coordinates ‘**rural semesters**’ placing students to live and work in host rural municipalities under university supervision. Placements are done on the basis of jointly selected themes, such as re-use of vacant buildings, housing, or gentle tourism. Municipalities fund the placements, provide free accommodation and workspace, designate a project lead and set up a ‘buddy’ network.

Between 2021 and 2025, the initiative placed 20 students in 17 villages and towns across Austria and Germany. It delivered concrete concepts, stronger town-university ties, and occasionally inspired students to stay, helping to counter brain drain and strengthen rural-urban links.



## CONTEXT

Small municipalities face a wide range of challenges that they often struggle to address because of limited capacity. Students, meanwhile, seek practice-based learning and rarely experience rural places during their studies.

The RURASMUS initiative turns rural municipalities into learning sites: students are relocated, work on a task agreed with the mayor and residents, and are supervised by a university lecturer for credit. The aim is to **broaden municipal capacity** while exposing **students to rural careers and countering ‘brain drain’** through first-hand experience and relationships.

## OBJECTIVES

- > Bring practical capacity – for example, fresh ideas, energy, and solution-oriented approaches – to small municipalities through one semester-long projects on locally identified priorities;
- > Give students meaningful, first-hand rural experience and a role in co-creating local solutions that shape the future of rural areas;
- > Build structured cooperation between rural municipalities and universities, with clear roles, supervision and academic credit;
- > Attract and retain talent to counter the rural ‘brain drain’.

**Themes:** Buildings, research and innovation, housing, spatial planning, LEADER/CLLD, education and training, youth, rural-urban linkages

**Countries:** Germany, Austria

**Organisations:**

- > RURASMUS e.V. – research institute for the promotion of new perspectives for rural Europe, non-governmental organisation
- > Local municipalities in hosting rural areas, public authorities

**Start & end date:** 12/2021 - ongoing

**Budget:** EUR 100 000 approximate annual operating budget

**Funding sources:**

- > Municipalities fund all direct project costs under cooperation agreements with RURASMUS e.V.
- > Municipalities obtain additional funding via national schemes, the LEADER programme, and other sources

**Website:** <https://www.rurasmus.eu/>

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## ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

**Preparation** (per project): the municipality and RURASMUS sign a **cooperation agreement** and define a **framework topic aligned with local needs** (e.g. re-use of vacant buildings, housing, gentle tourism). The municipality commits to free **accommodation and a workspace** with basic infrastructure for four to six months. Living space can be arranged flexibly (e.g. a vacant apartment or a room with a host family), and the workspace can be in the municipal office, a co-working hub or a local company.

A municipal project lead (usually the mayor or a senior councillor) is designated and a 'buddy' network of at least five residents is set up to help the student connect professionally and socially. Where possible, the town provides mobility support (bike, e-car sharing, public transport ticket).

RURASMUS recruits candidates, runs joint interviews with the mayor, and aligns the brief with a university lecturer who confirms feasibility and credits (typically 15-30 ECTS).

**Rural semester** (4–6 months, in residence): the student lives in the community, works in the provided space, meets residents and officials, and **develops an academically supervised project**. This does not constitute commissioned consultancy: students work as part of their degree (bachelor's, master's, flex/pro-bono semester abroad), bring disciplinary and soft skills (initiative, communication, curiosity) and immerse in community life.

Lecturers provide academic supervision and help keep the task realistic for university needs. RURASMUS coordinates all phases, mediates between participants, offers organisational support, documents progress and acts as the contact point in case of issues or conflicts, while facilitating peer exchange among students placed elsewhere and with representatives of the municipalities. Municipalities cover the project costs for the full cycle (about one year from prep to wrap-up) and may draw on LEADER/CLLD or national schemes to co-fund.



## RESULTS

- > **Talent attraction:** 20 students placed in 17 villages and towns across Austria and Germany, four of which stayed to live and work in the placement regions; another two are working in other rural contexts.
- > **Regional cohort:** eight students worked on a shared theme across eight municipalities in Salzkammergut (Austria) in 2024. This included mid-term coordination, final public exhibition and a printed publication, enabling cross-municipal learning and wider visibility.
- > **Usable outputs for municipalities:** students delivered site analyses, re-use concepts and implementation plans, which informed council and community discussions. Their work led several towns to prioritise re-use over new construction; one municipality rezoned land to enable development, while another created a coordinator role to drive vacant-building activation.
- > **Structured cooperation model:** host villages implemented a replicable set-up – free housing and workspace, a five-person 'buddy' network, mobility support, 15-30 university credits, and academic supervision – lowering barriers for future cohorts.
- > **Perception change and civic dialogue:** mayors in the cohort highlight lasting added value and increased political attention to issues such as multigenerational housing and re-use of existing building stock. Among local residents, scepticism toward new ideas from the outside diminished noticeably.



## SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

- > **Establishing trust:** working side-by-side enables towns, students and locals to learn from each other, bridging the academic-municipal gap and turning initial scepticism into trust through direct experience.
- > **Relevance with visible outcomes:** each placement tackles a concrete local issue and ends with public sharing (e.g., council presentation/exhibition), which keeps the work practical and useful.
- > **Fresh perspectives, mutual learning:** students bring curiosity and unbiased ideas to real rural challenges and opportunities; municipalities gain professional input and reflection.
- > **Flexible design, continuous improvement:** independent, lightweight structures allow adaptation and innovation; regular feedback and evaluation strengthen quality over time.
- > **Lasting effects and talent:** some students stay on to work in rural regions, building careers and local capacity, demonstrating how urban-based studies can lead back to the countryside.
- > **Financial accessibility:** smaller municipalities often face funding gaps; simple co-financing models help make the model accessible and scalable.



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