

# GUIDELINES

FOR TEACHING CAREER-ORIENTED COMPETENCIES  
IN THE HUMANITIES WITH A BUILDING SET FOR  
DESIGNING CAREER PREPARATION MODULES

The project is funded by the EU



Erasmus+

**TALC** *me* Textual  
and Literary  
Cultures  
in Medieval Europe



FOREWORD	04
EMPLOYABILITY: THINK CAREER SKILLS	05
EXPLORING THE BORDER BETWEEN UNIVERSITY AND CAREER	06
GUIDELINES	08
1. TEACH TRANSFERABLE SKILLS	10
2. FOCUS ON LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION	11
3. PROVIDE SOCIOECONOMIC KNOWLEDGE	12
4. PROMOTE AND REFLECT ON PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES	13
5. BUILD AND SUSTAIN NETWORKS	14
6. PROVIDE INDIVIDUAL ADVISING AND SUPPORT	15
BUILDING SET	16
FURTHER READING	17
CREDITS	18
TALC_ME	19

# GUIDELINES

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## FOREWORD

All across Europe, graduates in the humanities face special challenges in the transition from university to career. They are generalists, as a rule, and their professional profiles are not tailored to the market. What distinguishes them is the action competencies that they have acquired during their studies: language skills, analytical thinking, curiosity, and organization. All this makes them a strong addition to the workforce, whether as employees or entrepreneurs. Compared to graduates of other disciplines, they are less likely to complain of skill deficiencies in relation to their jobs.

However, students of the humanities have a difficult time entering the working world. It is the duty of the universities, therefore, to ask themselves how they can improve students' career skills, their employability. But what does employability mean? Is it something

that can and should be promoted in the course of academic studies? And if so, how?

TALC\_me, a partnership between ten European Universities and three non-university institutions created with the support of the Erasmus+ programme, has undertaken to answer these questions. Using the culture and literature-based subject German Medieval Studies as an example, the consortium has developed Guidelines for Employability – recommendations for the design of humanities degrees to improve career skills teaching. The Guidelines are supplemented by a building set, which can be used to create bespoke employability modules for various disciplines. We hope that these guidelines can be helpful to you in the development and design of your programmes.

## EMPLOYABILITY: THINK CAREER SKILLS

University and career have a particularly undefinable relationship to each other. It is true that a university's first priority is to create academics, not employees, but the years of study are generally followed by some form of career outside the university. This means, therefore, that university studies always function as career preparation, even when that is not explicitly mentioned. This recently became a topic of wider discussion during the process of the Bologna Reforms, and at the center of the discussion stands a concept that has recently made its way into university dialogue: employability.

Originally used in relation to the reintegration of the long-term unemployed into the workforce, employability today simply refers to the ability of an individual to react flexibly to the many varied

challenges of professional life. Employability is no longer about the careful tailoring of a professional profile. Rather, it is about honing much more basic life skills and these life skills can be gained in the process of academic study, particularly through examination of the subjects in humanities fields. The duty to provide students with career skills does not, therefore, reduce universities to simple job-training centers – at least not when correctly understood. It is and remains exactly that atmosphere of free academic, experimental thinking, not subject to any preconceived ideas on process and action, which allows a student to develop his or herself and thus create a foundation for a successful career.

*„Don't be afraid of branching out! A certain amount of specialization is certainly useful, but it is also important to acquire a wide breadth of knowledge in the humanities in order to leave your career options open. Try combining law and languages, or law and business, or philosophy, business, and languages...“*

response to the survey of employers

# EXPLORING THE BORDER BETWEEN UNIVERSITY AND CAREER



*At the workshop “Competencies and Employability for Medievalists”, teachers of German Medieval Studies and similar subjects discussed the question of how the most relevant career skills could be promoted in the course of a degree. We can thank the lively discussion for important momentum in the development of these guidelines.*

## OUR RESEARCH HAS THREE MAIN OBJECTIVES:

First, we wanted to know exactly which competencies our graduates were acquiring in the course of their studies and how these competencies were of use to them in their later lives and careers. Additionally, we wanted to know which required competencies the most common careers of our alumni had in common, and whether any of these competencies had been neglected in university studies thus far. Finally, we were interested in the way degree programmes are designed: which elements they should contain in order to arm our students as well as other students of the humanities

with the skills they need to succeed in their lives and careers.

To find answers to these questions, we implemented the following strategies: To begin, we brought teachers of our subject together with representatives of humanities careers (journalism, cultural management, and public relations) together for a workshop.

Based on the results of this workshop, we developed a series of interview questions, which we asked employers in various fields across Europe. These interviews allowed us to reduce the results of the workshop discussion to a core group of competencies, which are key to the employability of humanities graduates.

Nine of these core competencies then became the basis for an electronic survey, which we sent to graduates of humanities disciplines. The purpose of this survey was to discover if, when, and in what context these competencies were really being acquired: within the course of study or outside of it at a job or during volunteer work. We also asked the alumni for suggestions on how to improve the ways in which these competencies could be promoted in an academic setting. To supplement our research, we asked degree coordinators at 23 universities in 15 European countries for the measures they take in their institutions to promote employability and to tease out a best practice model from a variety of approaches.

After carefully discussing the results of our research, we ended up with a collection of recommendations for the improved promotion of career skills in students by universities. They can be found on the following pages.

## RANKING CORE CAREER SKILLS

### Employer Survey Results

#### 1 Communication skills:

the ability to understand and be understood

#### 2 Analytical skills:

the ability to grasp and break down complex topics and recognize relationships between different aspects of a topic

#### 3 Self-Management:

the ability to pursue goals consistently without distraction

#### 4 Conceptual and Strategic Thinking:

the ability to develop plans, to think things through, and to weigh consequences

#### 5 Criticism Skills:

the ability to give and receive constructive feedback

#### 6 Teamwork Skills:

the ability to work productively in cooperation with others

#### 7 Role competence:

the ability to define your position and field of action

#### 8 Organizational Skills:

the ability to structure projects, gauge their progress, and steer them if necessary

#### 9 Writing Skills:

the ability to express oneself in various textual formats

#### 10 Specific Subject Knowledge:

the abilities required for a specific field

#### 11 Intercultural Competence:

the ability to change perspective and understand foreign points of view

## COMPETENCIES AND COMPETENCE AREAS

The term 'competencies' refers to the skills and capabilities an individual needs in order to cope with situational tasks. Competencies are different to intelligence in that they can be learned and increase with experience. There have been several attempts to map out the field of competencies; we have decided on a four-field matrix of Subject Competence, Methodological Competence, Social Competence, and Self-Competence.

Subject Competence envelopes all the knowledge and methods necessary for solving subject-related problems, while Methodological Competence includes those skills that apply across disciplines, such as writing or presentation skills. Social Competence involves interpersonal communication skills and conflict management, and Self-Competence refers to those skills linked to self-reflection and self-development.

# GUIDELINES

FOR TEACHING CAREER-ORIENTED COMPETENCIES IN THE HUMANITIES

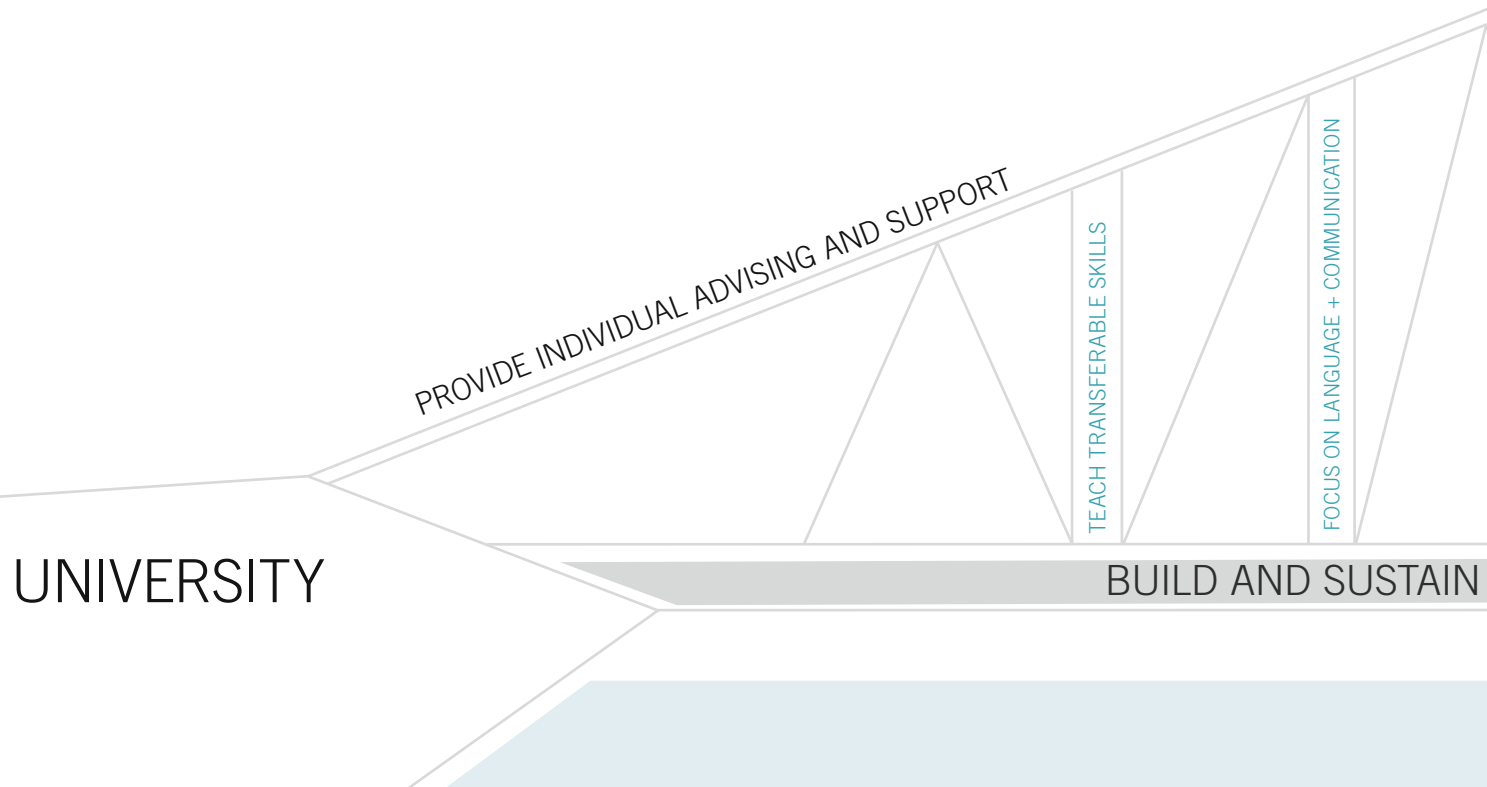
We are convinced that the promotion of employability in the humanities can only succeed if we relinquish our perception of the gulf between theory and practice, between academia and “the real world”.

The humanities have always promoted competencies that fall under what is now being called “employability”. Some of these include: (inter)cultural competencies (current and historical), writing and presentation skills, and analytical thinking. Skills that traditionally fell under the heading “education”. It seems advisable to make this aspect of university study clearer to ourselves and to students, both in class and in reflective spaces designed for this purpose, leading to a more active role in shaping the area between study and career. Between lectures and internships lies a number of activities that are conducive to both subject-specific education and employability.

*„At university, I often asked myself, what do I need this for?*

*I think it would be a good idea if the concept of employability was introduced right at the beginning.“*

response from the alumni survey



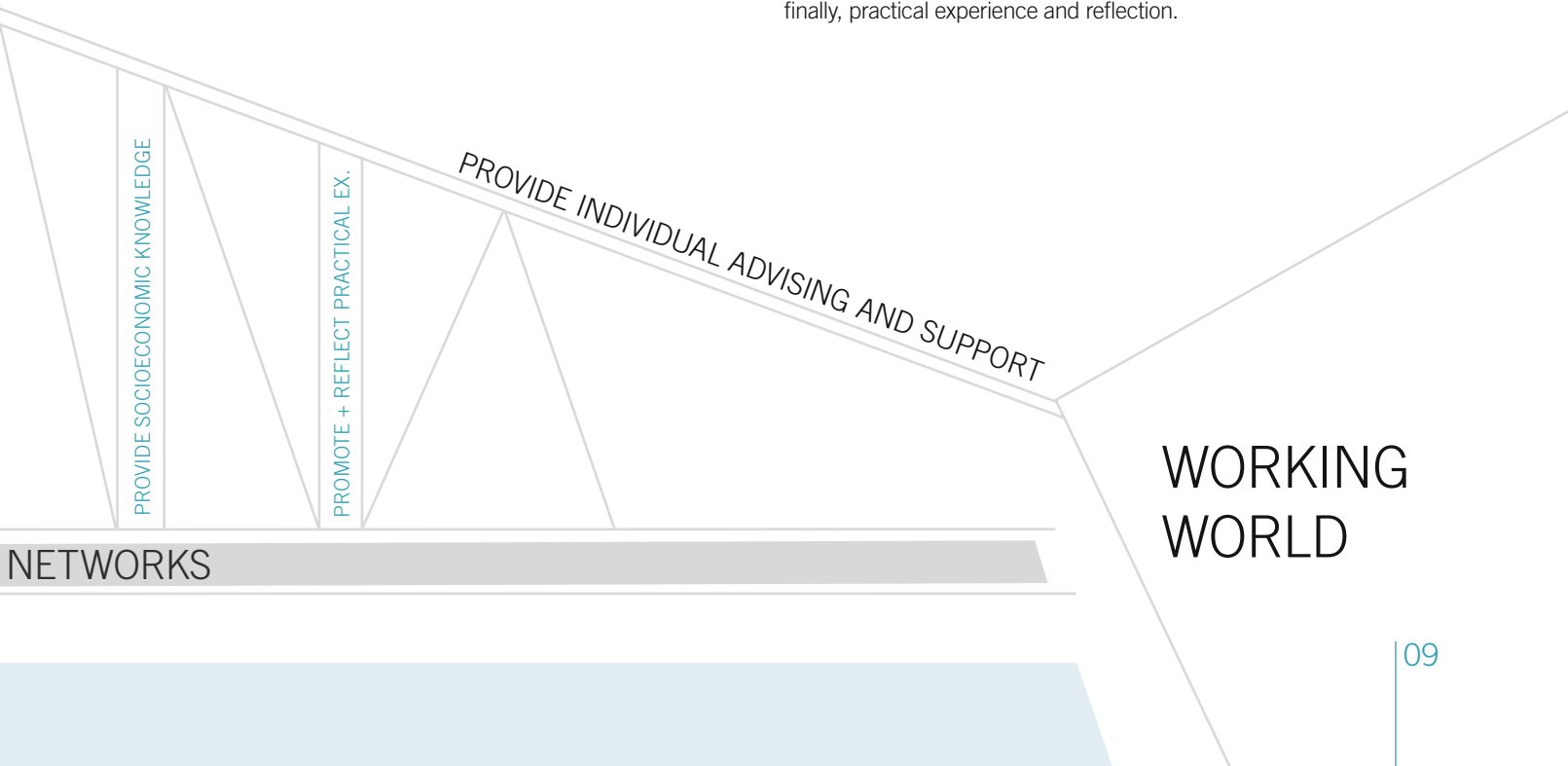


*„Education, properly understood,  
is the real employability.“*

faculty member

Although these guidelines focus on career-oriented competencies, they should not be taken to mean that we wish to renovate university programmes to the detriment of academic knowledge and skills. Our goal is to build a bridge, a bridge to a career, a bridge for each individual student which begins at university and enriches both the university and the subject matter itself.

This bridge is built on six principles or guidelines to which a degree programme should adhere if it takes its educational function seriously in the sense that we have described it here. Two of these principles span across university and the working world and are extremely relevant to both: the building and sustaining of networks, that is, the creation of helpful social relationships, and individual advising and support. The other four guidelines are geared either more towards work or towards academia. Building a bridge from university to working life, these four include the teaching of transferable skills, a focus on language and communication, providing socioeconomic knowledge, and finally, practical experience and reflection.



# 1

## TEACH TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

When it comes to making students employable, good teaching is key. An engaged pedagogy helps develop students' competence beyond pure subject knowledge and therefore contributes significantly to their education and employability. It takes students' individuality into account and creates space for personal development. This kind of teaching cannot be defined in a manual – what is important is the way interactions occur in lectures, seminars, and office hours. A variety of social situations (structured seminar discussions with clear rules, independent learning/research both alone and in a group, one-on-one talks, etc.) are particularly valuable for creating an environment which encourages competence. Additionally, it is important not to view diversity (cultural and linguistic ability, varying experience) in a seminar group as a nuisance, but to use it actively to create the drive and motivation to delve into the subject at hand. How can we support individual

teachers in creating academic syllabi that encourage skill development? One option is further pedagogical education for university teachers, but this option is often constrained by a lack of time and institutional embedding. The promotion of information exchange among colleagues seems to us to be more useful. Teachers in each department should be given regular opportunities through their institutions to exchange their ideas and experiences in a protected space.

*“The more creatively and independently the students are allowed to work, the better. There must be room for failure.”*

responses to the alumni survey

*“Less lecture,*

*“Communication skills can only be partially developed at university. There must be an awareness that they are to be honed and strengthened in other areas of life as well.”*

# 2

## FOCUS ON LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Communication skills have been named as the key career competence by both our alumni and the employers we interviewed. Language and communication are also central themes in the humanities, so you already have plenty of academic expertise in this field. How are the actual communication skills of your graduates, though? If you define communication skills as the “ability to understand and be understood” and take them seriously as an action competence, recognizing that not simply theoretical reflection but its use in practice (e.g. active listening, audience-oriented speaking) is at the core of these skills, then you begin to recognize opportunities for active practice. This is true for both speaking and writing and for both native and foreign languages. It seems practical to strengthen academic consciousness of the relevance of various communication styles and forms and to place greater importance on good communication skills. Binding stan-

dards should also be agreed upon for the process of giving feedback on written or spoken assignments. Workshops about negotiation or intercultural reflection could be a good addition in this area. Writing assignments should be integrated into seminar syllabi – not just academic texts, but also journalistic or literary forms.

Students write a press release for a cultural project



more practice!”

### Communication skills – the ability to understand and be understood

Teaching deficits in the area of communication skills (alumni survey):

Communication skills  
are required in my current job



n=54 avg=6,52

My communication skills were developed  
or strengthened during my studies



n=82 avg=5,48

## 3

## PROVIDE SOCIOECONOMIC KNOWLEDGE

Business management and administration skills are essential to nearly every career field. We consider it worthwhile to work to provide students of the humanities with some of these tools. These tools also include hard basics such as budget management, not just those skills traditionally associated with humanities disciplines, such as marketing and public relations.

How can these topics be integrated into a humanities curriculum? One possibility would be to offer introductory lectures on business management as elective courses, or as workshops in related modules like project management. A seminar involving a fictional startup company could be a more integrated method. This seminar would not only allow students a detailed look into economic processes,

it would also show them the possibility of another, often-overlooked career option: entrepreneurship. Economic thinking can be best combined with academic subject matter in project-oriented learning. The cooperative and detailed nature of planning and developing a project such as a conference, a play, or an exhibition improves both academic competence and economic thinking.

*Students acting as project managers in a cultural project*



*“In all of my various jobs, I’ve always profited from the hard skills I learned during my economics degree: bookkeeping, cost calculation, organizational development.”*

**response to the survey of employers**

## 4

## PROMOTE AND REFLECT ON PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES

Important career-related competencies such as conceptual and strategic thinking can be best developed in practice; practical experiences should therefore be a part of the degree programme.

In most subjects, this happens as part of a classical internship. As valuable as these experiences may be, they have the disadvantage of being generally unconnected to university studies. We consider the connection between practical experience and extensive, structured reflection to be indispensable. In addition to the widely-used method of reporting on internships, other, more interaction-based methods like workshops and discussions (either one-on-one or in a group) may be useful. Ideally, these discussions will supplement the advising portion of the degree programme.

Another, more academically oriented method is that of project courses (see Guideline 3). These courses combine improved com-

petence with a stronger identification with the subject field, a factor that has proven to be connected with academic success. In this case, cooperation with non-university institutions (museums, newspapers, libraries) and experienced advisors would be ideal, especially if these advisors have an academic background in the humanities.

Finally, we think it is a good idea to encourage students to engage in volunteer work and to select any part-time jobs with careful goals in mind. These activities also provide opportunities to develop skills that will be central to a career – according to the results of our alumni survey, at least.

*“You should be open to many career paths – try out many things at the beginning to see how your interests and skills can be used in practice. There are more career options than majors!”*

response to the survey of employers

### Conceptual and strategic thinking – the ability to develop plans, to think things through, and to weigh consequences

Teaching deficits in the area of conceptual and strategic thinking (alumni survey)

Conceptual and strategic thinking is required in my current job

Not at all



Quite a lot

n=54 avg=5,94

Conceptual and strategic thinking was developed or strengthened during my studies

Not at all



Quite a lot

n=82 avg=4,41

## 5

## BUILD AND SUSTAIN NETWORKS

A graduate's first job often comes through contacts made academically or in his or her personal life. This is a good reason to encourage students to actively develop networks that span into the working world. Personal contact with representatives of relevant career fields allows for individualized advising and offers students a realistic look at the challenges and parameters of working life. A concerted effort to provide students with opportunities for personal contact with career representatives can be made through a mentoring programme.

Established career representatives are not the only contacts relevant for network building; it is also important to form relationships with colleagues. Ideally, all students will be able to form networks during their studies, which they can carry with them through the challenges they face in (working) life. We therefore recommend gi-

ving students opportunities to meet and gauge each other's potential, whether through projects, excursions, or colloquia (the latter ungraded). Additionally, it seems useful to promote volunteer work or relevant side jobs through some system of recognition.

Finally, teachers in each field should be encouraged to build and sustain contact with employers in the region. Exchange across institutional boundaries allows teachers to gain a lasting sense of the chances their students will have in the future. This can be accomplished through cooperative workshops.

**What do you think? Which of the following aspects helped you find a job? (you may choose more than one)**



## 6

# PROVIDE INDIVIDUAL ADVISING AND SUPPORT

For the development of self-competencies, that is, the recognition of personal strengths and weaknesses as well as the determination of career goals and plans to reach them, individual advising is the method of choice. These are competencies that can only be developed to a limited extent in the course of group activities.

We believe that a degree programme should always include a binding advising plan for teachers and students in addition to the academic curriculum. Ideally, this should be a combination of primarily subject-, study-, and career-related elements. Regarding academics, we recommend intensifying personal contact with teachers, perhaps through mandatory advising appointments each semester. This subject-specific advising should be supplemented by the offer of general studies advising, which takes the goals of the student into account, and if necessary, teaches general study

techniques (time management, academic writing), allows room for the handling of study-related problems, and consistently asks the questions: What can you do? What are your particular skills? This kind of individual skill analysis creates a solid foundation for career decisions. Lastly, the student's concrete career desires should be a recurring theme. This is where cooperation between advising offices at each institution becomes helpful, as well as, if possible, a mentoring programme with representatives of relevant career fields (see Guideline 5).

An advising plan should help relieve the enormous pressure to perform that has been placed on students until now. Within the framework of advising which is ungraded and oriented towards problem solving, students can be guided towards better prioritizing and a more economic use of resources.

*“My advice for students? Head in the direction of your desires and passion.”*

response from the survey of employers

## BUILDING SET

FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CAREER-PREPARATORY MODULES  
IN HUMANITIES DEGREE PROGRAMMES

We have supplemented our Guidelines for the Promotion of Employability with a building set of 24 cards, on which we have sketched out possible courses and course elements. You can use these elements, which are of course open to all forms of variation, to build an employability module that fits all of your needs and requirements.

The cards contain the following information: the number of ECTS credits, class type and time commitment, and a short description. They also show which competence fields and individual competen-

cies are being promoted and on which of the previously described guidelines the class is focused, as well as notes about particular challenges for students, teachers, or the budget. We recommend combining the cards to create a module that touches on as many competencies as possible and meets all of the guidelines.

Please view our building set as a stepping-off point. Many of the suggested courses can be designed in other ways, expanded, offered for different credits, etc. If you think of new ideas while experimenting with our sample classes, then we have reached our goal.

## KEY

### Competence Level Required



## FULFILLMENT OF GUIDELINES

Teach Transferable Skills	●	●	●
Focus on Language and Communication	●	●	●
Provide Socioeconomic Knowledge	●	●	●
Promote and Reflect on Practical Experiences	●	●	●
Build and Sustain Networks	●	●	●
Provide Individual Advising and Support	●	●	●

€€€ LOW COST

€€€ MID COST

€€€ HIGH COST

30 hours = 1 ECTS





page 2

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The cultures and languages of Europe provide the basis on which our future depends. A new generation of medievalists should learn how cultures and languages developed, what discussions took place – and then draw their own conclusions. This is important not only for our common future in Europe, but also for young Europeans to be able to develop professionally.

The study of the cultural and literary history of pre-modern Europe can be made into a resource which can allow us to mould the future of our open, pluralistic society – by being aware of our history, well-prepared for a variety of jobs and having the ability to move between different cultures. TALC\_me, the European network for medieval studies and career orientation, connects academic scholarship, learning, and career training in an intercultural framework.

TALC\_me has two main objectives: to offer excellent training for students in the humanities with a major in cultural and literary medieval studies. At the same time, TALC\_me aims to equip students with the necessary skills and tools for succeeding in the job market. Thirteen European partners from universities, cultural institutions, and the media are striving to attain these goals.

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