

# ESN's Contribution to the Evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy (2019–2027)

*Perspective of Erasmus Student Network on the EU Youth Strategy implementation*



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**ESN's Contribution to the Evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027)**

**Published by:** Erasmus Student Network AISBL

**Authors:** Nathan Lusseau, Simone Lepore, Dominika Guzik

**Design:** Cristina Aterido

**Cover photography:** Erasmus Student Network AISBL

Erasmus Student Network AISBL

Rue Joseph II 120

1000 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 256 74 27

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# Introduction

The Erasmus Student Network (ESN), one of Europe's largest youth and student mobility organisations, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the CULT Committee's work on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (EUYS) 2019–2027. ESN works with hundreds of thousands of young people each year and gathers perspectives from learners with very diverse profiles, making it well positioned to contribute to the evaluation of the Strategy.

This contribution is informed by ESN's operational, policy and research experience, [ESN's participation as an International NGO delegate at the European Youth Conference in Copenhagen](#), and the priorities reaffirmed at the **Council of Europe Ministerial Conference on Youth in Malta**.

# ESN's perspective on the EU Youth Strategy implementation

Across the three pillars of the EU Youth Strategy, ESN's evidence points to a consistent pattern: young people value opportunities for participation, mobility, and personal development, yet **structural barriers still limit their full engagement.**

## “Engage”: Youth Participation and Democratic Life

The “Engage” pillar aims to strengthen meaningful, inclusive participation in democratic life. While participation structures such as the EU Youth Dialogue have expanded, several limitations persist.

First, **participation mechanisms continue to reach mostly young people who are already engaged**, while underrepresented groups—young people facing socio-economic difficulties, students with fewer opportunities, and those lacking prior civic experience—remain less involved. This gap was also highlighted during the European Youth Dialogue cycle.

Findings from the [DIEM](#) (Diversity & Inclusion in Erasmus+ Implementation) project also show that **students with fewer opportunities continue to face structural barriers** that limit their access to mobility and, consequently, to many of the civic participation opportunities linked to Erasmus.

Second, **internationally mobile young people remain insufficiently integrated into participation mechanisms during their stay abroad.** Yet research consistently shows that mobility develops civic attitudes, increases interest in European affairs, and strengthens a sense of belonging. ESNsurvey data shows that after mobility, students report an increased feeling of European identity (ESNsurvey XV, p.112).

Mobility therefore prepares young people to become *future engaged citizens*, and participation structures would benefit from **involving them already during their mobility experience.**

Insights from the [ECEM](#) (Enriching Communities through Engaged Mobilities) project highlight that students are more likely to engage in civic or community activities when cooperation

between higher education institutions and civil society organisations is facilitated, suggesting a clear opportunity to **strengthen democratic participation** through mobility (ECEM, Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility through Volunteering Report).

At the **European Youth Conference in Copenhagen**, young delegates stressed the importance of making participation opportunities more transparent, accessible, and easy to use. (EUYD11 EU Youth Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, Conference Report)

ESN observed similar expectations through its participation in the Conference. Strengthening visibility, follow-up, and accessibility of participation opportunities would significantly advance the “Engage” pillar.

The **Malta Council of Europe Ministerial Conference** through its Final Declaration and the “Resolution on the Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective”, reaffirmed the value of a *rights-based youth policy*, an approach where participation is treated as a right young people are entitled to, rather than an optional consultation. Examples include the **co-management system of the Council of Europe’s Advisory Council on Youth** and or student advisory boards in universities.

Expanding such approaches, would support the full implementation of the “Engage” pillar.

### **“Connect”: Learning Mobility, Inclusion, and Social Connection**

The **“Connect” pillar** aims to make learning mobility accessible and meaningful for all young people. While Erasmus+ has significantly expanded opportunities, several obstacles still limit the Strategy’s full impact.

ESNsurvey data indicates that financial predictability remains a challenge: a notable majority of students report receiving their mobility grant only after departure (62.7%), which can create early financial pressure and reduce accessibility (ESNsurvey XV, p.11).

At the **European Youth Conference in Copenhagen**, delegates underlined the importance of ensuring *timely and reliable grant payment*, a recommendation that speaks directly to the Strategy’s ambition of making mobility equitable and inclusive (EUYD11 EU Youth Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark; Conference Report, p. 17).

Recognition of learning achievements abroad also continues to affect the quality dimension of mobility. Although a mobility period is designed to correspond to a full study load, students still

frequently report discrepancies between completed and recognised credits, with a small but meaningful proportion receiving no recognition at all (2.6%) (*ESNsurvey XV*, p.103). This uncertainty discourages participation and undermines the Youth Strategy’s objective of removing barriers to cross-border opportunities.

Findings from [DIEM](#) show that **access to mobility remains uneven**, especially for students from under-represented backgrounds or with fewer opportunities, underscoring the need for institutional support to ensure more equitable mobility (DIEM; Inclusive Access and Participation in Erasmus+ Mobility Report).

Finally, the support ecosystem surrounding mobility requires attention. Satisfaction with host and sending institutions has declined in recent years, and many mobile learners report difficulties integrating into their host community, with more than 50% (53,37%) not being actively involved in local activities (*ESNsurvey XV*, p.69). The survey also indicates that **“problems connecting to locals”** are among the most frequent issues reported during mobility (*ESNsurvey XV*, p.72), highlighting the importance of reinforcing integration pathways. These factors weaken the Strategy’s broader goals of fostering solidarity, intercultural understanding, and social belonging.

Insights from the [ECEM](#) project underline that cooperation between higher education institutions and civil society organisations can significantly strengthen opportunities for **local engagement and community participation** during mobility (ECEM; Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility through Volunteering, 2024 Report).

Overall, strengthening financial reliability, clarifying recognition processes, and improving local integration would significantly enhance the effectiveness of the **“Connect” pillar** and support more inclusive, high-quality mobility experiences.

## **“Empower”: Skills, Well-being, and Empowerment**

The **“Empower” pillar** aims to support young people’s personal development, well-being, and capacity to participate fully in society.

Evidence collected through *ESNsurvey XV* shows that mobility contributes positively to these objectives: **30.66%** of students report improved academic performance after their experience

abroad, and many highlight gains in transversal skills such as intercultural competence, adaptability, and communication (*ESN Survey XV, p.104*).

However, these benefits coexist with significant well-being challenges. A substantial proportion of students report experiencing anxiety or stress during their stay abroad (**42.3%**), while **37.6%** mention decreased motivation to study and **35.4%** note a reduced sense of belonging to the local community (*ESNsurvey XV, p.9*). These trends are consistent with the discussions held at the **Ministerial Conference in Malta**, where youth mental health was identified as an urgent and structural policy concern (10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth, Final Declaration, p.2).

Digitalisation also remains uneven, despite being an integral part of youth empowerment in the EU Youth Strategy. Only **22.25%** of students report using fully digital procedures for recognition or administrative steps (*ESNsurvey XV, p.10*), suggesting that many still encounter administrative or technical barriers that reduce autonomy and can add stress to the mobility experience.

The [ECEM](#) project also highlights that recognising skills gained through community engagement or volunteering during mobility can further strengthen students' personal development and contribute to **post-mobility empowerment** (ECEM; Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility through Volunteering, 2024 report).

Similarly, results from the [EUNIVERSE](#) project suggest that opportunities to reflect on **European values** and democratic participation help young people translate their mobility experience into long-term engagement with European affairs.

Ensuring that these opportunities are accessible to **students with fewer opportunities** is particularly important for realising the empowerment objectives of the Strategy, as indicated by [DIEM](#) findings on inclusive access in Erasmus+ (DIEM; Inclusive Access and Participation in Erasmus+ Mobility Report).

# Horizontal outputs

## Youth mainstreaming

Youth mainstreaming aims to integrate youth perspectives across all policy areas. While recognised in the EU Youth Strategy, implementation remains uneven. Young people are frequently consulted **only** on topics explicitly framed as “youth issues”, instead of being included in broader policy debates such as housing, or climate. Ensuring that young people participate across these areas would strengthen the coherence and societal relevance of the EU Youth Strategy.

## Monitoring and evidence

Monitoring tools remain fragmented across Member States.

In simple terms, **there is no common set of indicators that allows consistent tracking of progress** on key Youth Strategy objectives such as participation, inclusion, well-being, or mobility. This makes it difficult to identify where the Strategy is succeeding and where additional efforts are needed. A shared monitoring framework would allow the EU and Member States to coordinate more effectively and support evidence-based policy implementation.

## Governance and coordination

Young people repeatedly express the need for transparent and accountable governance frameworks. Insights from the Copenhagen Youth Conference and the discussions in the Ministerial Conference in Malta highlighted the importance of clear follow-up mechanisms and sustained coordination across sectors (10th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers responsible for Youth, Resolution on the Council of Europe Reference Framework on a Youth Perspective, p.9). Stronger governance structures would help ensure coherent implementation of the Strategy, particularly in areas requiring multi-sectoral collaboration.



# Recommendations

Building on the evidence above, ESN proposes the following priorities for the next phase of EU youth cooperation:

- **Strengthen the inclusiveness and representativeness of youth participation.**  
Ensure involvement of youth organisations and integrate internationally mobile youth in participatory structures, reflecting their strong civic engagement outcomes
- **Address financial and structural barriers to mobility.**  
Guarantee timely grant payments, expand targeted support for inclusion, and address rising housing challenges. The recommendation from the EU Youth Conference in Copenhagen to deliver Erasmus+ grants before a mobility period should be prioritised
- **Prioritise inclusive mobility measures for students with fewer opportunities.**  
Develop targeted mechanisms and institutional support to address structural barriers limiting access to mobility and participation
- **Ensure transparent and automatic academic recognition.**  
Develop EU-wide monitoring mechanisms to uphold commitments and reduce disparities in recognition practices
- **Recognise non-formal and informal learning outcomes gained during mobility.**  
Promote institutional and EU-level frameworks that acknowledge skills acquired through volunteering, community engagement and service-learning, both during and after a mobility experience.
- **Promote structured integration during mobility.**  
Support cooperation between host institutions and youth organisations to increase social belonging, given the low levels of engagement with local communities
- **Strengthen post-mobility engagement pathways and alumni involvement.**  
Support mentoring schemes, alumni roles and Erasmus Generation Ambassadors to sustain civic engagement and learning outcomes after mobility
- **Integrate mental health and well-being into mobility governance.**  
Following the policy direction reaffirmed in the Council of Europe Ministerial Conference in Malta, incorporate well-being guidelines and targeted support across all mobility phases

- **Strengthen youth mainstreaming and evidence frameworks.**  
Develop EU-wide indicators for participation, inclusion, well-being, and mobility outcomes, enabling more coherent and responsive youth policy.



## Conclusion

ESN reaffirms its support for the objectives of the EU Youth Strategy and acknowledges the progress made in expanding youth participation and mobility opportunities. However, evidence from ESNsurvey XV, reinforced by the conclusions of the EU Youth Conference in Copenhagen and the Ministerial Conference in Malta, indicates that significant challenges persist.

The Erasmus+ programme places a specific priority on engagement in democratic life, and its objectives closely align with the participation and empowerment goals of the EU Youth Strategy. Accessibility, meaningful participation, well-being, and cross-sectoral coordination must remain central priorities for the next phase of European youth policy.

Strengthening synergies between Erasmus+ and the EU Youth Strategy can further amplify the impact of mobility on young people's sense of belonging, identity, and civic engagement.

ESN stands ready to collaborate with European institutions, Member States, and youth partners to ensure that future youth strategies reflect the realities, needs, and aspirations of young people across Europe.



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