

ESN's contribution to the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 interim evaluation

Introduction: the role of the Erasmus Student Network in the youth field

The Erasmus Student Network is the largest student and alumni organisation supporting international and exchange students all over Europe. Our more than 500 local associations are connected with more than 1000 Higher Education Institutions active in Erasmus+, and our presence in 41 countries gives a broad perspective of the reality of young people in both EU Member States and countries in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership. Our Network has around 15,000 active members and even more “buddies”, who are mainly taking care of international students. Thus, ESN involves around 40,000 young people offering its services to around 350,000 international students every year.

ESN has a unique capacity to gather the voices and experiences of young people, mostly students involved in higher education. We combine a strong data collection tradition with direct contact with students on the ground, which allows us to represent their needs, interests and ideas. Moreover, given the organisational structure and volunteer-based work in ESN, we have a solid experience in youth work, volunteering, skills development and recognition.

Our contribution to the interim evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 is therefore based on a combination of our research and policy initiatives, and our experience working with young people on the ground, as well as being involved in various initiatives for the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy, such as the EU Youth Dialogue and the European Youth Work Agenda.

ESN's research and policy outputs can be checked on our website: www.esn.org/policy.

EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027: successes and challenges

As the Erasmus Student Network we truly believe in the potential of the EU Youth Strategy: a tool that can foster youth participation in democratic life, support social and civic engagement, and ensure that all young people have the necessary resources to take part in society.

We appreciate the efforts of the Council Resolution of 26 November 2018 to identify the challenges borne by younger generations, particularly related to civic and political participation, such as underrepresentation in political bodies, notwithstanding the long-lasting impact of policies on young people.

With our work and research in inclusive mobility (e.g., [ESN Survey](#), [Social Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility Research \(SIEM project\)](#), etc.), ESN has identified that especially youth coming from disadvantaged backgrounds are generally less active citizens and have less trust in institutions.

We believe that Europe cannot afford wasted talent, social exclusion or disengagement among its youth. Only by involving and empowering all young people, youth policy can contribute to successfully meeting the vision of a continent where young people can seize opportunities and relate to European values. This is why we advocate for a wider participation in mobility as a means to significantly increase democratic participation among young people. In this regard, we appreciate that the EU Youth Strategy recognises the potential for younger generations to have a positive impact on society when engaged and empowered, as well as the role of youth organisations in the process. We also agree on the necessity of mobilising EU-level policy instruments and actions on the national, regional and local level (with a cross-sectoral approach) to make sure that young people have the necessary resources to take part in society.

We have identified as particularly successful the approach of implementing solutions according to engagement, connection and empowerment. We are especially aligned with the statement that “connections, relations and exchange of experiences are a pivotal asset for solidarity and the future development of the EU, and this connection is fostered through mobility”. These mobility experiences, such as youth exchanges and projects within Erasmus+, as well as volunteering opportunities in the civil society sector, must be fomented and made accessible to all. EU funding is extremely relevant to support this ambitious goal and allows all young individuals, also those with fewer means to study, work or volunteer abroad with non-formal and informal learning opportunities. Within this context, the EU must focus its efforts on developing effective systems for validation and recognition of skills acquired abroad. We also agree with the claim that youth work can serve as a catalyst for empowerment, as it increases the chances of employability.

More specifically, we agree with the need for evidence-based youth policy-making. For this reason as ESN we have developed the ESN Survey to collect the inputs of young people across Europe. Secondly, we believe that reaching out to and involving youth organisations as ESN is key in achieving the objective of participatory governance. Thirdly, we would like to stress the importance of mobilising EU programmes and funds with effective monitoring systems. We also appreciate the efforts of creating a New Youth Dialogue.

As the association that represents the Erasmus Generation, we truly believe in the power of international education as a means to create a positive change in society. In the next chapters,

we have identified the main recommendations to the European Commission to continue improving the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy.

Aspects for improvement in the interim review of the EU Youth Strategy based on existing evidence

This document summarises the main areas for improvement in the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy from the perspective of the Erasmus Student Network, following the core areas of action in the Strategy.

Engage

- *Encourage and promote inclusive democratic participation of all young people in society and democratic processes;*
- *Actively engage young people, youth organisations, and other organisers of youth work in policies affecting the lives of young people on all levels;*
- *Support youth representations at local, regional and national level, recognising young people's right to participate and self-organise;*
- *Support and convey the EU Youth Dialogue in order to include diverse voices of young people in decision-making processes on all levels;*

The EU Youth Dialogue is one of the most important, if not the most important tool through which young people can connect with other young Europeans, experts in the field of youth, national and European political bodies and directly influence different policies aimed at youth. ESN takes part under the YFJ's umbrella of INGYOs, which puts it in a separate group compared to representatives of National Youth Councils, Ministries, different youth agencies and researchers. In the current Dialogue model, unfortunately, **INGYOs find themselves in an undefined position**, where their expertise and outreach are not put in proper use - especially in the consultation phase of the cycle, where without funding and clear expectations they can only do so little to help engage young people in the process.

One of the youth goals which is in the centre of the current cycle of the EU Youth Dialogue is goal **#3 Inclusive Societies**. During the EU Youth Conference (EUYC) held by the French Presidency, young delegates raised their voices in favour of more inclusive EU programmes and more youth-inclusive decision and policy-making processes. Youth delegates stood against the "youth-washing" and asked for the youth test to be included in the policy-making process. The EU Youth Dialogue and the EU Youth Conferences in particular are amazing opportunities for youth participation and representation. However, currently most delegates in the Youth Conference are young people who are already active. The selection process for youth delegates is open to all young people only in very few Member States, which does not allow diverse representation of different groups of young people. The Conference itself is a 3-days event taking place during the weekdays, when young people are normally occupied with studies or

work. **These practices make the Youth Conference less inclusive and less diverse, narrowing down the participation to more privileged young people.**

The structure of the aforementioned initiatives (YC, YD) is not friendly to unorganised youth. There is a deficit in the access to information regarding the very existence of them or how they can participate or even attend. In relation to the peculiar officialese that is used in the process and in the accompanying material (digital or printed), it alienates young people that have no experience of the world of INGOs, NYCs and EU. The agenda, as interesting as it is, by addressing a plethora of obstacles that young people face in their daily life, it can not move them emotionally because of the language and in that way to create connections, debate and engagement by their side. Even if the current structure is maintained, **an improved dissemination of the agenda, procedure and results of the initiatives to the public spheres and realities of the Member States would be positive for the democratic life of the Union in order to avoid interaction with only the already active young citizens.**

Furthermore, the EUYC is supposed to provide space for dialogue between young people and policy and decision-makers. However, especially at the last EUYC in Prague, young people noticed that key political figures and high-level EU officials were absent at the Conference, or that their contribution was very limited. **We believe that in order to increase the impact of the EUYC such dialogue should be prioritised and better facilitated.** For example, inviting youth delegates to the Informal Ministerial Meeting right after the EUYC during the French Presidency for the very first time was a great opportunity for young people to be heard by both EU and national leaders. Such meeting formats should not be an exception, but a practice.

The implementation of the Youth Dialogue on the national and local level is highly dependent on the efficiency of the National Working Groups and the organisations that take part in them. Therefore, it is highly important that the eligibility criteria for the selection of organisations forming the National Working Groups enables participation of youth-led organisations that work on the ground with different groups of young people. It is important that the expertise of small-scale organisations is properly recognised. Oftentimes such organisations are ostracised, mostly due to existing legislative barriers to their participation (e.g. type of legal registration of the organisation), but also because they are less experienced in participating in wider EU processes. **Therefore, it is equally important that there are instruments for capacity-building in smaller youth-led organisations that work directly with and for young people that will enable them to take part in the EU Youth Dialogue.** Even if they do not participate in the role of member organisations of the National Working Groups, they should be given more credit to be active actors in the national and local consultations of the Dialogue, reaching out to young people from various backgrounds and different minority groups.

Additionally, it is extremely important to respect the timeline of the cycle and conferences and support timely exchange of information and reports. **By prioritising communication between the presidencies and among different participants of the EUYD, conferences become more fruitful and meaningful.**

- *Foster the development of citizenship competencies, through citizenship education and learning strategies;*
- *Support and develop opportunities for 'learning to participate', raising interest in participatory actions and helping young people to prepare for participation;*

INGYOs could play a leading role in activating young people across Europe to participate in democratic life, as pan-European youth organisations have direct access to very different groups of young people, especially in the consultation phase of the EU Youth Dialogue's cycles. Currently INGYOs are not included in the consultation process, meaning they do not have funds to organise impactful activities to reach and encourage young people to take part in the Dialogue, while their outreach is significant. **Therefore, a much bigger importance should be given to the role of INGYOs, by providing proper tools and financial support.**

According to the [ESN Survey 2019](#) "students with an exchange experience are far more engaged in civil society organisations than the average European youth" and "Erasmus+ alumni have higher interest and are more likely to vote in European elections than the European average". **Thus, the enhancement of mobility programmes and the support of youth organisations that develop activities related to active citizenship must be considered crucial.**

Connect

- *Enable access for all young people and youth workers to cross-border mobility opportunities, including volunteering, by eliminating obstacles and implementing support measures with special attention to young people with fewer opportunities;*

The Erasmus+ programme is an important driver for social mobility and is one of the main tools that the European Commission can use to foster inclusive education and equality. However, participation in the programme itself is currently hindered by several barriers, which impact students, especially those from underrepresented groups. Despite the budget increase of the programme, the overall participation rates continue to be low and students from fewer opportunities and backgrounds continue to face significant challenges to their participation, as shown by the [Social Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility research report](#) (Allinson & Gabriels, 2021). The Erasmus Student Network just recently published [technical recommendations](#), and proposed a set of concrete changes to the documents involved in the organisation of Erasmus+ mobilities, in line with the objectives of the Implementation Guidelines of the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy and the Framework of Inclusion Measures.

- *Encourage young people's engagement in solidarity, promoting support schemes and seek complementarity and synergies between EU funding instruments and national, regional and local schemes;*
- *Actively engage young people and youth organisations in the design, implementation and evaluation of relevant EU funding programmes;*

The Erasmus Student Network is the largest student and alumni organisation supporting the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme and learning mobility experiences in general. Our

multilevel structure allows ESN to have a direct engagement with all the key stakeholders. The creation process of the new programme was carried out with a considerable level of stakeholder involvement, and many of the [demands](#) coming from organisations such as the Erasmus Student Network were at least partially considered. The final funding allocation didn't meet the expectations, but it still constitutes a significant increase that will allow bringing more people to the programme. The new priorities of the programme are in line with societal demands and challenges that persisted in the previous programme involved in the programme.

The Erasmus Student Network recommends more comprehensive monitoring of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education commitments which aims at building capacity and improving the performance of HEIs throughout the 2021-2027 programme cycle. The Commission should encourage National Agencies and HEIs to involve student associations and representatives in the monitoring processes, both the self-evaluation by Universities and the different monitoring processes carried out by the National Agencies.

- *Share best practices and further work on effective systems for validation and recognition of skills and competencies gained through non-formal and informal learning, including solidarity and volunteering activities, continuing the implementation of the 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.*

Erasmus Student Network has won [an award for the work done in the field of competence development](#), and the creation of the validation of volunteer work process for ESN. Complimenting the internal work, ESN is one of the issuers of the Europass Digital Credentials for Learning, which helps with the recognition of learning processes and learning outcomes acquired through non-formal education activities and youth work. While Europass is well-known and widely used, the European Digital Credentials for Learning are growing their pool of users. **In order to help the process and information reach the ones who provide non-formal education learning opportunities, a smoother information flow from top to the bottom is needed.**

Empower

- *Develop and implement a European Youth Work Agenda for quality, innovation and recognition of youth work. In order to unleash the full potential, it is necessary to integrate the expertise of youth representations, youth organisations, youth workers and researchers. Further synergies with the work carried out by the Council of Europe in this area should be encouraged.*
- *Support quality youth work development on local, regional, national and European level, including policy development in the field, training for youth workers, the establishment of legal frameworks and sufficient allocation of resources.*

The expert group that focused this year on the development of the **European digital platform for youth work** has done a great job and has cooperated with the decision makers as well as the representatives of the community of practice. **However, a bigger representation of youth**

organisations is needed in the further steps that are to be taken in order to get closer to the finalisation of the platform and have it out in the world to use.

European Solidarity Corps General Online Training has been a helpful tool for youth workers, both the participants in the programme and the ones hosting and/or mentoring participants and organisations, both the hosting and sending ones. The Youth Panel is a productive mechanism that ensures the voice of former and current youth workers is heard but there is a potential to improve the work, and therefore the contribution of the Youth Panel if it would welcome more diverse group of people, e.g. representatives of youth organisations whose work is focused on the topics that will be covered in the courses and representatives of young people who come from a poorer socio-economic background.

- *Support youth work activities on all levels, including grassroots, and recognise youth organisations as providers of competences development and social inclusion through youth work and non-formal education activities, while respecting national, regional and local activities in this field,*

The new version of **Youthpass** has brought much awaited and therefore, very welcomed changes when it comes to its content and, by extent, the opportunity to adapt it more to the individual learning processes and outcomes that encompass more than it could have been covered by only the 8 Key competences. Now, more user-friendly and up-to-date with the demands on both policy levels and the needs and demands of the labour market and (young) professionals, Youthpass is a key tool in validating and recognising learning through non-formal education activities. **In order to broaden the user pool, it is needed to cater to a different set of needs that would make it easier to increase the number of users, both in organisations and individuals.** That is, when it comes to helping implementation and the start of using the certificate, formats different than a written document are needed. Simple session outlines on how to facilitate an onboarding of new users, video tutorials and/or step-by-step manuals with visuals would greatly help in expanding the user pool.

Main research and outputs by the Erasmus Student Network with regards to the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 and the European Youth Goals

Youth Goal #1 Connecting EU with Youth

The [ESNsurvey 2019](#) research report under the title “**Active citizenship and student exchange in light of the European elections**” explored the impact of Erasmus+ on the civil, social and political participation of young people in Europe. Even though the Survey shows that Erasmus+ Alumni have higher interest and are more likely to vote in European elections than the European average, students who are currently on exchange reportedly vote less, due to procedural barriers. Furthermore, the ESN Survey proves that students with an exchange experience are far more engaged in civil society organisations than the average European youth

and that EU students with exchange experience wish for more rights as EU citizens and for more European civic education in schools.

Youth Goal #2 Equality for all Genders

In 2019, ESN held a study session [ESN Gender Check up](#) which brought participants from 22 countries and the outputs were aimed at creating a multiplier effect by facilitating activities and sessions in the respective local and national ESN associations.

In 2021, ESN organised a training for trainers on the topic of [LGBTQI+ Community & Youth](#). As part of a training cycle on the topic of inclusion of LGBTQI+ students and youth, supported by the Council of Europe's European Youth Foundation, LGBTQI+ Community & Youth was a basic training for trainers on the topic of the LGBTQI+ where the participants were better acquainted with the main challenges that the LGBTQI+ students and youth face in the context of identity, sexuality, language and culture in society.

Additionally, ESN released the first-ever [mobility-focused LGBTQI+ survey](#) for former and current exchange students.

Youth Goal #3 Inclusive Societies

[The Social Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility Research](#) report has been a breakthrough in the existing literature and data collection in the field of inclusive mobility among students from fewer opportunities backgrounds. It collected more than 12000 answers from students, almost 1000 from HEI staff and a number of focus groups and study visits. The final set of recommendations targeting all stakeholders can be a source of inspiration for new inclusion measures in Erasmus+.

During the first year of implementation of the new Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 ESN published a [reaction to the framework of inclusion measures of the new Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes](#). This document provides ESN's analysis of some of the critical steps in the new framework and recommendations on their implementation.

The [ESN Survey 2018](#) edition, which goes under the title “**Mapping the challenges and enablers of international mobility for students with disabilities**” aimed at analysing the experience of students with disabilities, both with and without mobility experience and explored further how higher education institutions can act to improve their accessibility, both for their domestic and mobility students with disabilities. Only 15.1% of respondents with disabilities mentioned that their Home Higher Education Institution provides information on the Erasmus+ special needs grant, while 31.3% of the students with disabilities who successfully received the Erasmus+ Special Needs Supplementary Grant, mentioned that all of their access needs were covered by the grant. 83.8% of the sample of students with disabilities were either satisfied or very satisfied with their mobility experience.

Youth Goal #4 Information and Constructive Dialogue

In 2019, In cooperation with the Council of Europe and the European Youth Foundation, ESN launched a [training program on Media Literacy](#) for its volunteers. The goal was to develop both the media literacy and the facilitating skills of the participants, so they could then share what they learned among their local and international colleagues.

The [Erasmus Generation Participation and Engagement project \(EGPE\)](#) of ESN, co-funded by the European Parliament, aimed at engaging young people in the Parliament's work, raising awareness about the role of the European Union, fighting Euro-scepticism and increasing democratic participation. On the national level, 8 national policy dialogues, 26 local policy dialogues and 40 Erasmus in schools activities took place within the EGPE project framework. Overall, we estimate that 5850 participants took part in an event covered by the EGPE project.

Youth Goal #7 Quality Employment for All

ESN's main project for skills development and validation of our volunteers, called [myESNcareer](#) and coordinated by ESN members specifically trained to coordinate the validation process for the volunteers, offers employability-related services. The project aims to build a structured learning process for the volunteers to track the development of the competences in ESN to be able to validate them inside the organisation in order to make the volunteers more employable and competitive on the labour market.

[ErasmusJobs.org](#) brings together the Erasmus Generation and employers. Created by the Erasmus Student Network the website focuses on increasing the employability of students who have experienced a mobility exchange, highlighting its beneficial effects to future employers. The platform wants to facilitate the interaction and application process between Erasmus+ graduates and employers recruiting young people with an international mindset.

Youth Goal #10 Sustainable Green Europe

The [GreenErasmus research report](#) published in 2022, and carried out as part of the GreenErasmus project coordinated by ESN, compares over 10.000 students' consumer behaviour, travel behaviour, and daily life habits while at home and during their mobility.

Additionally, the [Erasmus Goes Green Project](#) consortium in which ESN is a partner launched a [Carbon Footprint Calculator](#), a CO2 visualisation tool to reduce the Erasmus+ carbon footprint, and produced a handbook for higher education students, as well as guidelines for higher education institutions for more sustainable internationalisation of higher education, which can be found [here](#).

Youth Goal #11 Youth Organisations & European Programmes

Erasmus Student Network has contributed to the final evaluation of the Erasmus+, through the combination of ESN's research and policy initiatives carried out since 2014, and from the

experience of working with students, Higher Education Institutions, National Agencies, and the European Commission for almost a decade now. [Our contribution to the final and mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus programme can be found here.](#)