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Participation in Learning Mobility as a Driving Force to Change the European Union

Breakout Report from the XV ESNsurvey



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Participation in Learning Mobility as a driving force to change the European Union

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1. Introduction

Ever since the European Union laid the foundations of the Single Market and its four freedoms of movement, the possibility of enhancing transnational collaboration in education, creating opportunities and experiencing another education system abroad has become a significant and ambitious European project. The establishment of the Erasmus+ programme in 1987 further enhanced the freedom of movement, creating even more opportunities to move around the Union and highlighting unity in diversity through mobility opportunities. The Bologna Process and the creation of the European Education Area have enabled Member States to develop more resilient and inclusive national education and training systems. These policy initiatives have made it possible for more than 13.7 million Europeans to experience mobility abroad since the creation of the Erasmus+ programme, with numbers increasing each year.¹ Furthermore, the new Council Recommendation "Europe on the Move" sets a target for at least 23% of higher education graduates to participate in learning mobility, aiming to make learning mobility a reality for everyone.

The goal of this report, titled "Participation in Learning Mobility as a Driving Force to Change the European Union," is to determine whether participation in international mobility, particularly through the Erasmus+ programme, is a decisive factor in making students more engaged in society and more likely to participate in the upcoming EU elections, set to take place between the 6th and 9th of June 2024. This report also gathers information about their perspectives on the priorities for the next mandate of the European Institutions and compares these findings with other relevant sources.

As we approach the next European Elections, it is crucial to reflect on the successes, achievements, and necessary improvements of the Erasmus+ programme. This report is based on data collected directly from international students through the XV ESNsurvey research.

The ESNsurvey is a European-wide research project implemented by the Erasmus Student Network, covering different topics related to international student mobility. Being one of the biggest student-led initiatives of its kind, it has inspired ESN's international student

¹ Erasmus+ Annual Report 2022, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023

representation and advocacy efforts to improve the access, experience, and impact of mobility since its first implementation in 2005.

Even though the ESNsurvey reached out to three different target audiences - exchange students, full-degree students, and non-mobile students - the data shown in this breakout report focused solely on exchange students, comprising 78.40% (n = 17,855).

ESNsurvey XV is a quantitative and deductive research based on an online questionnaire that was launched on the 29th of May and closed on the 31st of July 2023, constituting a collection period of 2 months for the survey. The data collected are from students who were enrolled in Higher Education in the academic year of 2021-2022 and/or the academic year 2022-2023.

2. Before and After Mobility - Erasmus+ Students' Citizenship

As stated in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide, one of the priorities of the European Union with the Erasmus+ programme is to “*support, through lifelong learning, the educational, professional and personal development of people in education, training, youth and sport, in Europe and beyond thereby contributing to sustainable growth, quality jobs and social cohesion, to driving innovation, and to strengthening **European identity and active citizenship***”². However, as already outlined in many other studies, it is important to make a differentiation between citizenship and identity. In previous research publications, this distinction has already been made, where “*identification as European was linked to i.e. a cultural sub-component and European citizenship to a civic component*”.³ In this perspective, this report intends to focus on the sense of citizenship that students feel before and after going abroad and provide a comprehensive comparison between the feelings before and after their mobility experience.

² Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2024

³ Becoming Europeans: the relationship between student exchanges in higher education, European citizenship and a sense of European Identity, Christof Van Mol, 2018

As already previously analysed in the [Preliminary Report of the XV ESNsurvey](#), now we have the chance to have a closer look through a Likert scale at how participating in Erasmus+ is impacting students' perception of citizenship.

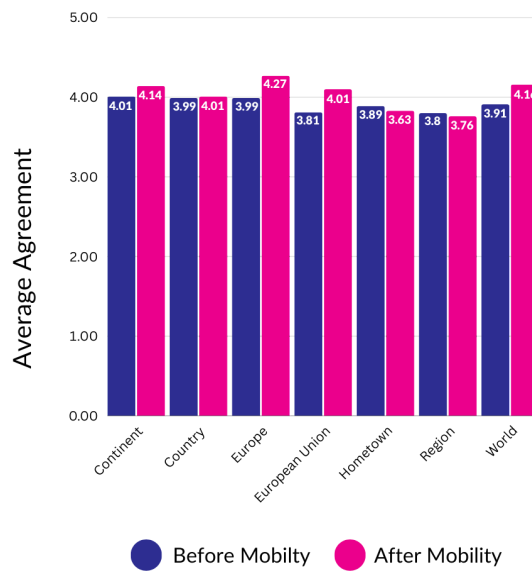


Figure 1: Comparison between the feelings towards citizenship before and after going abroad (n = 11038 to n = 11539/n = 10908 to n = 11285)

Before mobility, students had the weakest sense of belonging to the EU, but they felt strongly connected to their hometown and their country. However, the data shows that after mobility, those feelings and perceptions have gone through a change. Students with mobility experience feel strongly connected to Europe (3.99/4.27) and to the world as a whole (3.91/4.16), with a striking increase in their sense of belonging towards the EU (3.81/4.01). Another worth noting change concerns the feelings towards students' continent, which also increases (4.01/4.14), while the sense of belonging to their own countries solidifies its firm position (3.99/4.01). These findings underscore the transformative power of mobility experiences, which not only broaden horizons and enrich personal growth but also foster a stronger sense of European citizenship and unity among participants.

In Figure 2, while comparing the nationalities of international students and their feelings towards their EU citizenship, we observe that their sentiments towards the EU have only increased after mobility. It's important to note that Portugal has the highest results with 94%,

followed by Poland with 89%. The countries with the biggest difference in percentage points before and after mobility are Greece and Ireland (17% difference), followed by Italy (13% difference).

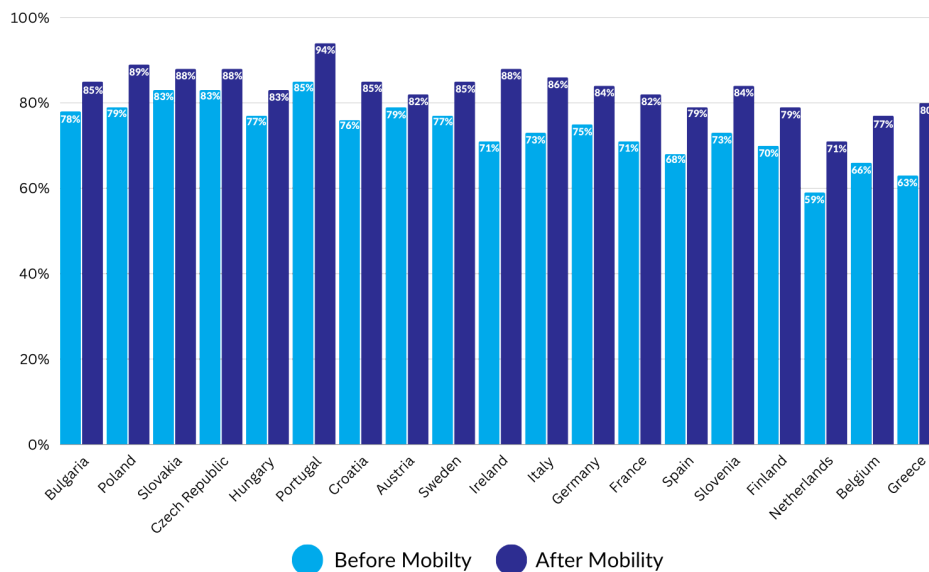


Figure 2: Comparison between nationality and the feelings towards EU citizenship before and after mobility⁴

Even though the percentages have increased after the mobility experience of international students, it’s important to note that for the majority of the nationalities represented, the feeling of European citizenship already exhibited high values before students went abroad. This perception aligns with other studies that show “exchange programmes mainly attract students who are already more prone to identify with Europe, as Europeans and as European citizens.”⁵ This raises the question of who the students participating in learning mobility opportunities are, and if the hypothesis above is correct, why other students are not participating in mobility.

To better understand the perceptions of students not going abroad, the Erasmus Student Network has also surveyed non-mobile students—those who have never participated in a mobility opportunity— under the XV ESNsurvey, and we hope to further explore this theme in a

⁴ Only relevant data was taken into account.

⁵ Becoming Europeans: the relationship between student exchanges in higher education, European citizenship and a sense of European Identity, Christof Van Mol, 2018

future breakout report dedicated to the perceptions of non-mobile students on mobility opportunities.

Although the literature doesn't provide us with concrete results on the idea of the Erasmus+ programme being an enhancer of both European citizenship and European identity, it's important to note that the past [three ESNsurveys](#) have shown the same trend: participating in mobility is indeed a catalyst for international students to feel more like citizens of the EU, Europe, the world, and their own country.

3. Voting Intention in the EU Elections

In the 2019 European Elections, due to “greater youth participation, demonstrating young people's desire for active political participation, including by casting their vote”, we verified an 8 percentage point increase in voting, reaching 50.6%.⁶

Since 2019, the European Union has taken further steps to engage young people with the EU, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe and the European Year of Youth. Even in the Erasmus+ programme in 2021, with the current programme edition, “Participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement” was added as one of the horizontal programme priorities. Several countries have also implemented different measures, such as lowering the voting age to 16 (Belgium, Germany, Malta, and Austria), introducing youth quotas, allowing online voting, decreasing the age to stand as a candidate, or promoting civic education in school curricula. With all these measures in place, youth participation in the 2024 European Elections is expected to make a change once again.

Given the introduction of these measures, especially the priority under the Erasmus+ programme, it was crucial for us to assess the voting intentions of international students after their mobility experience.

While analysing the data, it's important to note that the ESNsurvey was conducted almost a year before the election period. The data was collected from students enrolled in Higher

⁶ Youth participation in European elections, Micaela Del Monte, European Parliamentary Research Service, 2023

Education during the academic years 2021-2022 and/or 2022-2023, indicating that the new priorities of the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027 were already in place.

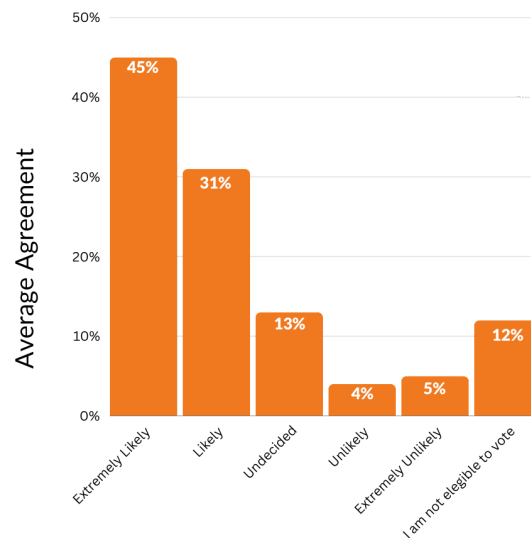


Figure 3: Voting intention of mobile students in the next EU elections (n = 11252)

As observed in Figure 3, the voting intentions of mobile students in the next EU elections scored high, with 45% and 31% showing intentions to vote. Figure 3 also shows that 12% are not eligible to vote, most likely because they are not EU citizens.

These results show relevant differences from the European Parliament Eurobarometer⁷, where the overall interest of the young population (15-24 age) in voting in EU elections is lower than that of the general population. Only 51% of young people show interest in voting, compared with 76% in the ESNsurvey results. Therefore, this data leads us to think that there is a positive correlation between participation in learning mobility and voting intentions.

⁷ European Parliament Eurobarometer, EB 101.1, Spring 2024

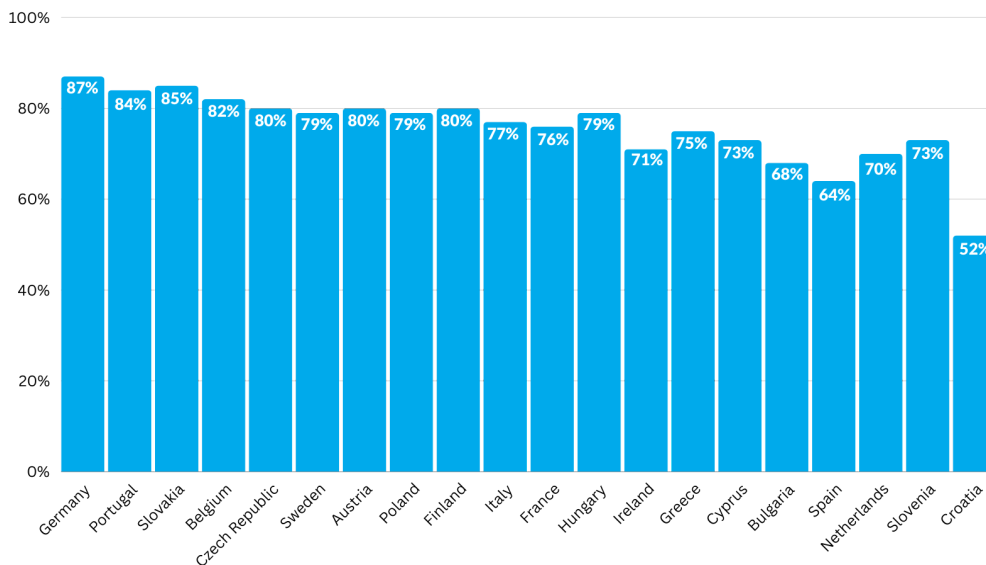


Figure 4: Comparison between nationality and the voting intention in the next EU Elections

While comparing nationality and voting intention in the next EU elections, we notice high intentions in Germany (87%), Slovakia (85%), and Portugal (84%). The nationalities with less expressed intention to vote are Bulgaria (68%), Spain (64%), and Italy (52%), although it's important to highlight that even if lower than other nationalities, it is still above 50%.

The same trend is observed when comparing the Eurobarometer and the XV ESNsurvey, showing a significant difference in voting intention among Erasmus+ participants in countries such as Portugal (84% in the ESNsurvey and 27% in the Eurobarometer), Slovakia (85% in the ESNsurvey and 49% in the Eurobarometer), Hungary (79% in the ESNsurvey and 52% in the Eurobarometer), and the Czech Republic (80% in the ESNsurvey and 47% in the Eurobarometer).

More detailed explanations about the voting intentions of young people and international students can be drawn from the EGIA Focus Groups. During the [Erasmus Generation in Action Project \(EGiA\)](#), we had the chance to conduct 39 focus groups with students. It was highlighted that all participants had “knowledge of different ways individuals can participate in the democratic life of the EU, but not everyone has chosen to actively participate.”⁸ The students expressed the importance of voting, considering they want to be responsible citizens, and they

⁸ More mobility, more European, more EU - A report brief on the results of the Erasmus Generation. Erasmus Student Network, 2024

believed their vote would help with the state of democracy and fundamental freedoms. However, when asked about what would increase their motivation to vote, they highlighted easy access to information about candidates, clear procedures, use of language that is comprehensible to all, presence of younger candidates, and engaging campaigns that address student issues. “The overarching issue with youth mobilisation is that young people currently feel disconnected from politics and often believe their votes don’t make a difference,” disconnecting them from voting and understanding what the EU institutions and the EU can do for them. “Therefore, improving awareness of the EU’s governance and its effects on both personal and societal levels is deemed crucial to boost participation and motivate young, often first-time, voters.”

4. Importance of EU policies

While looking at the importance of rights, freedoms, and policies (figure 5), it’s not a surprise that the highest priority among mobile students is “access to exchange opportunities like Erasmus” (2.91). However, it’s important to note that the differences in scores among the other priorities are not highly significant. Cohesion policies (2.89), programmes that promote social inclusion (2.87), policies on environmental sustainability (2.81), and even the “possibility to live, work, and study in any other Member State” (2.78) all score closely, reflecting their importance to exchange students.

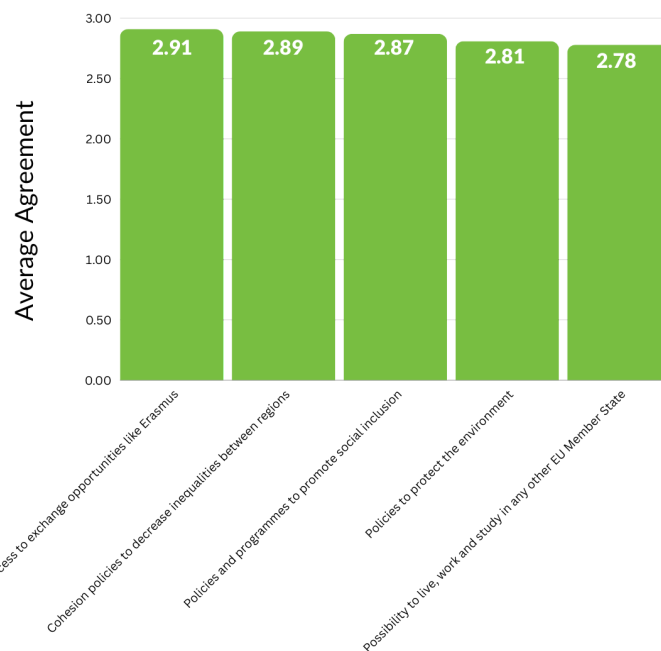


Figure 5: Importance of the rights, freedoms and policies for exchange students (n = 488 to n = 1276)

However, we observe interesting differences when comparing the subjects that rated highest on the agenda of exchange students in the XV ESNsurvey with the European Parliament Eurobarometer on the EU elections. In the ESNsurvey (Figure 6), digital transition scores the highest (9.16), contrary to the trend in QA14ab of the Eurobarometer, where it scores among the lowest. The “role of Europe in the world and freedom of movement” also scored high in the ESNsurvey (8.36). Immigration is considered relevant by the ESNsurvey participants (6.72), and it is of utmost importance for the youth respondents of the Eurobarometer.

Interestingly, climate change and environmental policies do not score highly in the ESNsurvey (4.51). Yet, they have been an increasingly important issue for young people, as clearly visible in the Eurobarometer results. Similarly, “fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law” score higher for young people in general, although they are not key for the ESNsurvey participants (2.45).

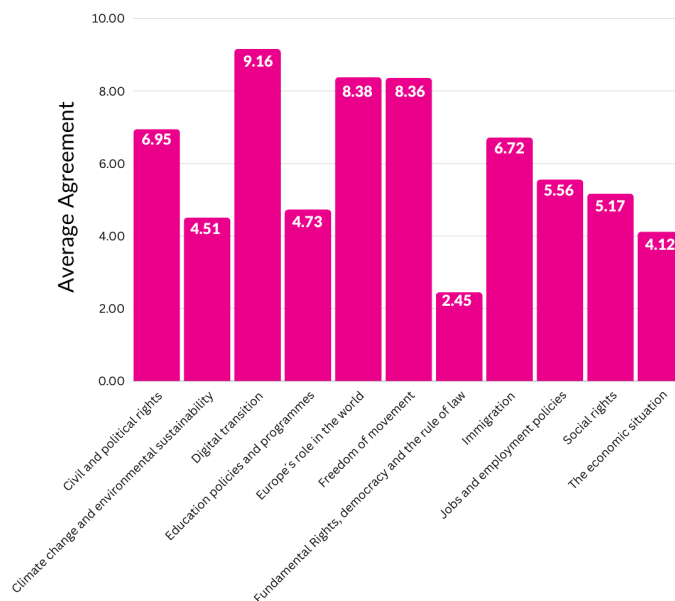


Figure 6: Most important issues for exchange students in light of the European Elections 2024 (n = 9678)

Given this, it is important to note that in the eyes of international students, access to exchange opportunities must remain a priority, alongside digital transformation, the role of Europe in the world, and freedom of movement.

5. Closing Remarks

With the publication of "Participation in Learning Mobility as a Driving Force to Change the European Union," a breakout report from the XV ESNsurvey, the Erasmus Student Network aims to bring the perspectives of international students to the forefront in the context of the upcoming EU elections in 2024.

The Erasmus+ programme is considered one of the most emblematic initiatives of the European Union and has supported 13.7 million individuals between 1987 and 2022⁹. As we approach the European Elections of 2024, it is crucial to reflect on the success of the EU policies and programmes, such as the Erasmus+ programme, from the viewpoint of one of their major beneficiaries, the students.

⁹ Erasmus+ Annual Report 2022, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023

The conclusions drawn from this report indicate that participation in international mobility programmes, such as Erasmus+, enhances the sense of European Union citizenship, as well as the broader perception of citizenship at the city level, European, and global levels.

Even one year before the elections, a vast majority of mobility participants eligible to vote in the EU elections expressed interest in exercising their voting rights. This is a positive indication of young people's engagement in the upcoming elections.

Regarding the priorities for Parliamentary candidates and the next Commission, the participants highlighted the importance of exchange opportunities, digital transformation, the role of Europe in the world, and freedom of movement.

To finalise, we would like to highlight that the elaboration of this report prompted the authors to reflect on the numerous achievements of the Erasmus+ programme throughout its existence, none of which would have been possible without the Single Market. We would like to conclude this report with a reflection on the proposal made by Enrico Letta in his report "[Much More Than a Market](#)"¹⁰, which calls for a fifth freedom within the Single Market to enhance research, innovation, and education. Additionally, we strongly believe, by looking at the results of this report, that this potential fifth freedom should not be overlooked in discussions about the next EU budget.

¹⁰Much More Than a Market, Enrico Letta, 2024

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