

The Erasmus+ Programme Has an Avenue for a Competitive and Prepared Future

Reaction and Recommendations of the Erasmus Student Network to the Union of Skills



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The Erasmus+ programme has an avenue for a competitive and prepared future: Reaction and Recommendations of the Erasmus Student Network to the Union of Skills

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The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) congratulates the European Commission on the launch of the Union of Skills, a significant step towards a more prepared and competitive future for the European Union. As the largest student and alumni network in the field of learning mobility, ESN had the opportunity to participate in the consultation with the Cabinet of Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu in January 2025, contributing alongside other key institutions and organisations from the higher education sector to the future of the European Union.

This document presents the conclusions drawn from ESN’s participation in the consultation, along with our views and recommendations on how the Union of Skills can be further developed to strengthen the higher education sector—specifically concerning student mobility under the Erasmus+ programme.

The Erasmus Student Network believes that the European Union must be a driving force in the development of skills and competencies by attracting talent from abroad and equipping young people with skills that are unique to different countries within the European Union. When these individuals return home, they will not only be citizens of their own country but also citizens of the EU, capable of implementing the knowledge gained from different countries, perspectives, and cultures. This experience provides them with a unique advantage in the job market. The Erasmus+ programme plays a crucial role in aligning the ambitious goals of the Union of Skills with its existing objectives, ultimately fostering a more resilient and strengthened European Union.

1. Erasmus+ as the driving force for competence development

For almost 38 years, the Erasmus+ programme has been enriching and transforming lives, continuously improving from one successor programme to the next. It has served as the EU's key policy tool in the field of education, equipping young people with skills and competencies that can only be fully acquired through international mobility exposure. This unique experience, facilitated and enhanced by the EU, provides participants with invaluable personal and professional growth opportunities.

However, the full impact of the programme is sometimes not fully perceived by its participants or the general public, making it difficult to draw a clear connection between the Erasmus+ programme and its significance in achieving the objectives of the European Union and of the newly communicated Union of Skills.

As the Union of Skills highlights, the core issue lies in Europe's "insufficient production of skilled graduates. Additionally, it does not provide enough opportunities for people to upskill or reskill throughout their working lives, leaving Europe vulnerable in the global competition for talent" (European Commission, 2025).

The Union of Skills aims to ensure that everyone in Europe, no matter where they are, is empowered to build solid skills foundations and engage in lifelong upskilling and reskilling, in line with the European Pillar of Social Rights. As the Erasmus Student Network, we believe that by enhancing and further developing the Erasmus+ programme, we can accelerate and strengthen skills acquisition more efficiently using already existing mechanisms.

As stated in Mario Draghi's report, "There is a large pool of untapped potential in Europe, and education and training should equip citizens with high-quality skills in an inclusive manner." EU programmes dedicated to education and skills should be redesigned to ensure that allocated funding achieves a much greater impact. "Through Erasmus+, young people are empowered to acquire transversal skills. Erasmus+ has become one of the most widely known EU programmes. However, it currently reaches only 15% of the EU's young people (Draghi, 2024)."

During the past 4 years, ESN in the framework of the Erasmus Career Project ¹ aimed to support these efforts at the EU level to further improve the recognition of transversal competencies gained during Erasmus+ mobility by bringing together the perspectives of students, universities and employers, and increasing the synergies between education and employment policies.

The desk research conducted as part of the Erasmus Careers project indicates that the most developed competencies during an Erasmus+ experience are autonomy, independence, social skills, language skills, employability, and flexibility. These findings align with previous research conducted by ESN in this field², as well as additional research within this project, which revealed that the skills most sought after by employers—adaptability, communication, teamwork, creative thinking, and self-efficacy—closely correspond to those acquired by students during their Erasmus+ mobility experience.

Although these may be the most identifiable skills on average, it is widely acknowledged that different learning experiences lead to diverse skill sets. The Erasmus Careers project highlights the crucial need to strengthen the post-mobility phase and improve the assessment of mobility experiences, increasing the structured reflection after mobility. It's also recommended that Higher Education Institutions organise reentry initiatives for mobile students focused on competency recognition and labour market integration, such as CV preparation and interview training, with the support of employers.

Furthermore, better alignment between education and employment policies could enhance the transition from education to the labour market. This could begin with reinforcing cooperation between International Relations Offices, Employment Offices, and employers.

To support the roll-out of competency recognition and employer engagement, the project has developed two deliverables that serve as crucial starting points for the implementation of the Union of Skills within the Erasmus+ programme. These outputs aim to align the programme with the acquisition and recognition of transversal skills:

¹ The ErasmusCareer project was developed by the Erasmus Student Network (ESN), Universidad Autonoma de Madrid (UAM), Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), Tilburg University (TU), Expertise in Labour Mobility (ELM), and the Lifelong Learning Platform (LLL), have launched the Erasmus Careers project.

² These results are also consistent with the research conducted under the ErasmusJobs project.

- [The Competence Inventory](#) – A framework designed by the Erasmus Careers Consortium that identifies and categorises the key competencies acquired by students during their study or work abroad.
- [The Employer Manual](#) – A guide designed to highlight the competencies students gain through mobility experiences, helping recruiters recognise and understand the significance of internationalisation in career paths.

Apart from the development of these key deliverables, it is also essential to consider the student learning journey. Higher education institutions must understand how to support students throughout their mobility experience. To address this, the project has developed a Roadmap for Learning in an [International Student Lifecycle](#), which defines structured learning paths and outlines various means of verifying competencies. The International Student Lifecycle is divided into five key stages: pre-arrival, arrival, during the exchange, preparing to leave, and re-entry. While assessing the journey of those who have already studied abroad, we must also consider the experiences of those who have not yet had the opportunity to do so.

International mobility is widely recognised as a life-changing experience, yet despite the European Commission’s commendable efforts in designing an Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, access to such opportunities remains unequal. Given that one of the goals of the Union of Skills is to “increase the accessibility of higher education to a wider range of learners and ages to meet the increasing demand for higher education graduates in the labour market,” there is a pressing need to improve Erasmus+ promotion, especially for the different variety of opportunities inside the programme.

We must ensure that those who typically do not have access to these opportunities are made aware of and supported in their participation in mobility programmes. Findings from the XV ESNsurvey further highlight that the knowledge of non-mobile students of other opportunities such as Erasmus+ Internships (58.08%), Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters (27.02%), and the European University Alliances (17.57%) still shows a lot of space for improvement (Dias, Buseyne, et al., 2024).

In this context, it is crucial to reinforce outreach strategies, particularly within higher education institutions, to ensure that more students are aware of these opportunities. By expanding access to Erasmus+ mobility, we can equip more young people with the knowledge and skills needed for the future of our Union. Special attention must be given to traineeships, as they

provide students with invaluable professional international experience, allowing them to gain skills and competencies directly in the job market while benefiting from Erasmus+ support.

Additionally, we must address the challenges that international students still face when studying abroad. Some higher education institutions have reported an increase in dropout rates among mobile students. It is essential to assess the reasons behind this trend, as well as the barriers preventing students from participating in mobility programmes in the first place. Many higher education institutions report that the main obstacles include financial constraints, mental health concerns, and the lack of adequate support during mobility.

Findings from the XV ESNsurvey highlight the reality of these challenges, with problems finding affordable accommodation (35.5%), financial struggles (35.63%), and the lack of automatic recognition of learning outcomes (33.97%) emerging as the three most pressing issues students face when going abroad. These factors contribute to increased feelings of anxiety and stress (42.3%), potentially discouraging students from engaging in mobility opportunities. Addressing these concerns through targeted policies and support mechanisms is essential to ensuring a more inclusive and accessible Erasmus+ programme (Dias, Buseyne, et al., 2024).

2. Flexibilisation learning paths adapted to the job market

Following previous studies, such as the reports by Mario Draghi and Enrico Letta, the Union of Skills also underscores the importance of investing in higher education “through joint study programmes within alliances of higher education institutions, such as European Universities alliances” (European Commission, 2025). As ESN, we recognise and support the enhancement of the European University Alliances initiative, actively participating as associated partners in the Community of Practice FOREU4ALL, serving on the advisory board of the INGENIUM University Alliance, and contributing to the Quality Council of ECU2.

In 2023, ESN published a policy brief, *Navigating the Future of European Universities Alliances*, highlighting the full potential of this initiative in facilitating seamless mobility, removing barriers to mobility, and making higher education more flexible. We strongly believe in the initiative’s potential and support the establishment of a sustainable investment pathway for its future, especially when considering the innovative approaches being developed within the alliances.

Through the European University Alliances, we can connect not only international students but also local students and the wider community, making this initiative unique in its ability to strengthen ties between higher education institutions and their local communities. With this in mind, we strongly believe that the development of Skills Academies, as stated in the Union of Skills proposal, must also be considered for implementation in the higher education sector. In this regard, existing similar alliance-led initiatives—many of which actively involve students in the preparation and implementation of activities—can serve as valuable sources of inspiration.

European University Alliances have served as testing beds for many of today’s key discussions in the higher education sector. They have played a pivotal role in shaping current realities and should continue to serve as spaces for piloting and experimenting with innovative approaches. However, findings from the XV ESNsurvey indicate that, unfortunately, students still lack awareness of the European University Alliances initiative, and it is not yet a significant factor when choosing their higher education institutions. This reinforces, once again, the urgent need to enhance outreach strategies for mobility opportunities (Dias, Buseyne, et al., 2024).

Although, throughout the new discussions brought by the European University Alliances, we have begun to reflect more on the need for the flexibilisation of curricula. The development of joint, flexible, and innovative learning opportunities is one of the key objectives behind the establishment of the inter-university campus, a central goal of the initiative. Students should be able to tailor their education to align with their professional aspirations. ESN fully supports this vision, believing that flexible learning pathways are essential for the future of higher education and learning mobility.

As “younger generations’ needs and expectations evolve, a fresh vision for education and career pathways may be necessary to align with the changing landscape of work and innovation.” Therefore, the way we teach and learn must adapt to these new realities. New curricula should be developed in collaboration with employers, ensuring a balance between the autonomy of higher education institutions and the needs of the labour market (European Commission, 2025).

Additionally, to deepen international cooperation, we must also strengthen partnerships between universities, businesses, and research institutions, fostering sustainable innovation ecosystems that ensure the long-term success of these initiatives and that the actual needs of the market and the students are fulfilled.

However, while aligning curricula with market demands is essential, we must also uphold the autonomy of higher education institutions and respect the principles of the Bologna Process. At the same time, we must enhance the tools provided by the Bologna Process to create a win-win situation that benefits both students and institutions.

European University Alliances have paved the way for the creation of innovative joint programmes, particularly among alliance partners, further strengthening the case for the establishment of a European Degree. ESN strongly supports this proposal, recognising its potential to equip future generations with the skills needed to remain competitive in an evolving global landscape.

The development of a European Degree represents a significant step forward toward a more integrated, innovative, and future-ready higher education system in Europe, while also providing a more sustainable framework for the creation of joint programmes.

As part of this journey, and in alignment with the Union of Skills, we must “expand the use of micro-credentials as flexible learning solutions, in line with the European approach, to ensure that they are trusted, understandable, issued digitally, and comparable across sectors and countries.” This requires actively engaging a diverse range of micro-credential providers, including private training providers, in addition to traditional education and training institutions (European Commission, 2025).

ESN strongly supports the enhancement of micro-credentials and is actively developing its own internal system for issuing them, designed to recognise and validate the skills acquired through volunteering activities within ESN. Additionally, we fully believe in the potential of piloting new initiatives within the Erasmus+ programme, particularly those related to joint programmes and the development of micro-credentials, as suggested in the European Commission’s communication.

Through the development of flexible learning paths and micro-credentials, the European Commission has proposed the better development of green and digital skills to equip the Union for a more competitive and sustainable future. Being two of the four priorities of the Erasmus+ programme, ESN has been actively working on understanding students’ perceptions through “Digital Transformation” and “Environment and fight against climate change” inside Erasmus+.

Our conclusions from several projects’ research lead us to understand that there is a gap between students’ attitudes and their actual behaviours, particularly when it comes to environmental awareness (Erasmus Student Network, 2025). This indicates that while students recognise the importance of environmental sustainability, they often do not implement the practices they have learned abroad due to financial concerns and time constraints.

A similar reflection can be made regarding the digitalisation priority, where even though students believe they have gained proficiency in the field, the lack of supporting tools and actions prevents them from making decisions that align with these goals.

In this way, we recommend that apart from further exploring the development of green and digital skills, these efforts should be matched with complementary actions at the EU level, such as developing and investing in digital tools to better manage Erasmus+ mobilities and enhancing the railway system in Europe to support more sustainable mobility options.

By addressing these challenges, we can ensure that students not only acquire essential skills but also have the necessary means to apply them effectively in their daily lives.

3. Attracting talents from abroad

To achieve the ambitious goals of the Union of Skills, it will be essential to “unlock the full potential of the single market.” As stated, “The single market provides a unique framework for the ‘circulation’—the free movement of people with their skills,” yet “barriers continue to hinder the seamless portability and recognition of people’s skills and qualifications”(European Commission, 2025).

We welcome the European Commission’s proposal “to make skills and qualifications—regardless of where they are acquired in Europe—transparent, trusted, and recognised across the single market, allowing individuals to exercise their right to free movement and enabling employers to recruit effectively across borders. It is also a call to Member States to work towards the fast recognition of skills and qualifications acquired outside the EU” (European Commission, 2025).

From ESN’s perspective, the full and successful implementation of the Union of Skills and the attraction of talent from abroad currently face two major barriers:

- The recognition of learning acquired abroad
- Barriers associated with visa procedures

Following the proposals outlined in the Union of Skills, we strongly recommend that Member States advance the recognition of competencies gained through learning mobility in non-formal and informal education, enabling their seamless integration into formal education and the labour market. We also urge the full implementation of the 2018 Council Recommendation on promoting the automatic mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad.

As stated above, the automatic recognition of learning outcomes remains one of the biggest challenges faced by students. In order for students to maintain trust in the Erasmus+ programme and the EU, it is crucial that these processes are well-established and efficient (Dias, Buseyne, et al., 2024).

We are glad to see back on the agenda a proposal for a European framework for the automatic recognition of study qualifications and learning periods abroad in schools, VET, and higher education, as well as the potential EU accession to the Convention on the Recognition of

Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (the 'Lisbon Recognition Convention'), ensuring that this issue remains a priority in policy discussions.

On the other hand, ESN strongly supports the creation and roll-out of an Erasmus+ Visa to make the EU Talent Pool a reality and to help achieve the European Commission's target of at least 350,000 learners from outside the EU coming to study and obtain a degree at the tertiary level in the EU by 2030. As highlighted in the XV ESNsurvey, participants reported issues with visa procedures (10.98%), making it the most pressing challenge faced by non-EU citizens when participating in mobility programmes (Dias, Buseyne, et al., 2024).

In many cases, even when both sending and hosting institutions approve a student's mobility, they are ultimately unable to participate due to complications in obtaining a visa. These results present an impasse, where universities support and encourage mobility, but national governments fail to facilitate the visa process.

We have consistently advocated for an Erasmus+ Visa, which could streamline this process and simplify visa procedures for non-EU students. This would not only enhance mobility but also make it easier to retain foreign talent and knowledge within the EU. A well-functioning Erasmus+ Visa would allow for the long-term retention of third-country students who participate in mobility within the EU, helping to address skills shortages, develop top talent, and support the roll-out of the Global Gateway Strategy.

We welcome the European Commission's presentation of a visa strategy that supports the arrival of students, and we hope to collaborate in finding more suitable solutions to facilitate participation for non-EU students in Erasmus+ opportunities. However, to make this strategy a reality, Member States and their consulates will need to ensure that long-stay visas and residence permits are issued in a timely manner.

4. The financial investment in Erasmus+ is an investment in the EU's future

As stated in the Union of Skills Communication, “Education and skills are an investment—not a cost—which yields benefits many times over.” Investing in the education and skills development of our population will not only provide individuals with greater access to quality jobs and professional growth opportunities, but it will also equip our Union with a stronger workforce, preparing us for a better future (European Commission, 2025).

Additionally, in line with the targets set by the Learning Mobility Framework³ and the goal outlined in the communication of the Union of Skills of “boosting mobility for all learners”, it is essential to strengthen Erasmus+ to make it more inclusive and accessible for all (European Commission, 2025). This requires addressing the urgent need for a significant budget increase, with a recommendation to increase funding fivefold, as suggested in the Mario Draghi report: “To reach every young person in the EU, the funding of the programme would need to increase five-fold for the 2028-2034 programming period. For an ‘Erasmus for all’, its funding in the 2028-2034 programming period would need to be five times the size” (Draghi, 2024).

While ESN strongly supports the increase in the Erasmus+ budget, we also believe that this must be accompanied by a commitment from Member States to better co-fund mobility opportunities—not only for individual mobility but also for initiatives such as the European University Alliances. Additionally, better integration of other funding sources, such as ESF+ (European Social Fund Plus), into Erasmus+ should be explored to further expand and enhance mobility opportunities and accessibility.

To finalise, as we believe that such ambitious proposals must be accompanied by proper monitoring and results analysis, we would like to congratulate the European Commission for the proposal of the European Skills Intelligence Observatory as a one-stop shop for data and insights regarding skills.

³ The Learning Mobility Framework targets are: 23% of graduates in higher education should have a learning mobility experience. At least 12% of learners in vocational education and training (VET) should benefit from learning mobility abroad.

Additionally, we would like to commend the creation of the European Skills High-Level Board and recommend that both civil society and students be represented in this high-level body. The inclusion of students and civil society aligns not only with the roll-out of the Youth Test but also with the fundamental principle that public policies must be assessed based on their real impact on society. If the beneficiaries of these policies are not consulted, it will be challenging to determine whether a public policy is truly effective or whether it is fully and successfully implemented.

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