

The Future of European Education Area

*Achieving Quality Education for
Future Generation of Students*

Introduction

In September 2020, the European Commission launched its vision for achieving a European Education Area (EEA) by 2025¹ with new priorities that offer young Europeans more opportunities in education, training, youth and culture at the EU level, and enable them to reach their full potential.

Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is pleased to see the new Communication released by the European Commission and is grateful to see that some of our input during the multiple consultations has been taken into consideration. Although the European Education Area Communication addresses all levels of education, this paper will focus particularly on the Higher Education field by highlighting ESN's vision on how to achieve the European Education Area. Several of the aspects in the Communication have to do with the future Erasmus+ Programme and ESN's vision on this is found in our #ErasmusUpgrade Manifesto².

The greater focus of the initiative was set on improving the quality and inclusiveness of education, along with improving/upscaling the digital and green dimensions in education systems and at advancing high-quality, inclusive education, paying special attention to key skills learning, acquired in a lifelong learning process.

Higher education is experiencing profound changes as new technologies and pedagogies have been highlighted by the impacts of COVID-19. The COVID-19 crisis has affected all students, especially those who are in a socially disadvantaged position, and we strongly support the enhancement of the inclusion aspects.

ESN welcomes the idea of a European Education Area that creates direct links with the values of the Erasmus+ programme and recognises the need to update its learning mobility framework in order to enable more learners and teachers to overcome barriers and benefit from a quality mobility opportunity. The revised framework tackles three main challenges in order to ensure more quality and resilience: ensuring opportunities for a wider variety of participants, green and digital mobility and encouraging balanced mobility. Through this paper

¹ European Commission (2020) *Communication on achieving the European Education Area by 2025*, COM(2020) 625 final. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/eea-communication-sept2020_en.pdf

² See <https://esn.org/news/esns-vision-future-erasmus>

we challenge relevant actors to ensure that the quality of the international connection and learning, the achievement of the same depth of learning, and the promotion of intercultural dialogue, remain at the heart of the programme.

Good quality learning mobility can bring quality outcomes of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes and contribute to the development of societies, communities and individuals. It is encouraging to see that the European Education Area Communication considers quality education and learning mobility such an essential priority.

Furthermore, the Communication is right to put the Erasmus+ Programme and student mobility in the centre of the higher education part. ESN agrees that “Student and staff mobility has progressively opened up higher education and strengthened the basis for structured cooperation” (p. 10). The Communication further correctly points out that “only 5% of students can have the Erasmus+ experience.” In order to improve this, several ideas, outlined below, are needed.

Recognition of Mobility Outcomes

The fear of lack of academic recognition and the consequential prolongation of the studies remains one of the biggest obstacles faced by students who consider the option of studying abroad³. We welcome the decision of the Commission to continue providing support to the Member States for putting in place the conditions that will make automatic mutual recognition possible by 2025 and we are anticipating to be introduced to a more detailed work plan about the initiative. The mobility experience should give the students the freedom to decide what classes they want to choose for their interests and their studies, and those choices must be recognised. We also salute the decision of the Commission to support the Member States and HEIs using the standard European tools available in Europass to issue authentic digital credentials, including digital diploma and micro-credentials. Issued digital credentials will facilitate recognition and make the process more efficient.

³ European Commission (2019) ,*Erasmus+ higher education impact study*, p. 73. Available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/94d97f5c-7ae2-11e9-9f05-01aa75ed71a1>.

European Universities and European Degrees

ESN believes that this initiative might be a good way for bold small-scale experimentation, where mobility bottlenecks can be identified; solutions can be found, and later up-scaled. Intra-alliance mobility can, if done correctly, have the same positive impact on students and the wider learning environment as “regular mobility” and ESN therefore welcomes the emphasis that these alliances are given in the Communication.

For example, it says that “the Commission will also examine together with the Member States and stakeholders the development of a European Degree that could provide a framework to ease the delivery of joint degrees of Universities alliances” (p. 20). This would “allow students at all levels and across all disciplines to choose what, where and when to study within the members of a transnational University alliance” (p. 21).

This is an interesting idea which ESN is carefully in favour of. If a “European Degree” can help overcome various barriers to mobility, this is to be welcomed. Automatic recognition, which is mentioned several times in the Communication, and which seems to face some reluctance when the topic is brought up, should of course be part of these degrees. Achieving “European Degrees” will not be an easy task. The consultation questions circulated to stakeholders⁴ correctly identifies many problems: legal barriers, challenges with accreditation & quality assurance, terms with different meanings in different countries, etc. Pilot studies in which all stakeholders - students, HEIs, member states and others - feel ownership of the process need to be well-designed and carefully evaluated.

It is also important that the support structures that are there for exchange students are also extended to the “European Degree” students. For example, the students from other countries still need support with accommodation, health and of course cultural integration with the local community. The latter can be done together with student organisations such as ESN. A student coming from one country to another does, after all, need the same support whether he/she is part of a regular Erasmus mobility or a “European Degree”.

One important aspect of the “European Universities” is that there needs to be mechanisms in place for up-scaling the outcomes. ESN understands that it will take time to get these

⁴ European Commission (2020) *DRAFT Road towards a “European degree”: Identifying opportunities and investigating the feasibility of different approaches*. Not yet published.

mechanisms going, and any testing should take its time and be evaluated properly. However, once that is done, successful initiatives need to move beyond the testing phases, making sure that more than the current 280 HEIs can benefit from the outcomes and ideally spill over to the entire Higher Education sector at large.

Lastly, one of the cornerstones of the European Universities Initiative is the student engagement. Since the launch of the first call, significant progress has been made by the alliances in this direction. Students have started creating their own student governance within the alliance and they are taking part in the decision making process. This effort must continue and the student involvement should be increased throughout the years in order for the students to have a meaningful involvement in their alliances. HEIs should urge the student body to engage in activities which can make them more actively engaged and urge them to join student associations/clubs/unions.

Green Erasmus

The Communication places a great emphasis on the Green aspects of the various programmes, which is expected and fully in line with the recent discussions in Europe on the topic. We are happy to see sentences like “Further initiatives like incentives to carbon-friendly physical mobility travel would complement the measures” (p. 18); if one can promote greener travel within mobility programmes with financial or other incentives, that is good. However, ESN would like to point out that the travel is only a small part of the overall environmental impact on education. A study from ETH Zurich has shown that student travel constitutes only a few percent of the total greenhouse gas emissions generated by the institution⁵. The overall lifestyle during the mobility period should be more sustainable, and even more importantly: the mobility programmes, including Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps should be seen as an opportunity to educate a generation of young Europeans on the importance of environmental sustainability. Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps are programmes to improve the learning and training opportunities of young people; embracing sustainability in the learning objectives, will have a longer lasting behavioural impact and spillover effect that can go hand in hand with more sustainable modes of transport.

⁵ See www.ethz.ch/airtravel

Furthermore, we are still worried about the overall language in this discussion, and especially the mix-up between “virtual and blended mobility” with the green discussion. We are sceptical to the term “virtual mobility” in the first place (more of that below), and the Communication says “In line with the proposals, the future Erasmus and European Solidarity Corps programmes will be greener and more digital. Virtual and blended mobility could complement physical mobility” (p. 18). We believe this is a wrong approach; although various types of online collaboration is to be encouraged across borders, in no way should the environmental aspects be seen as an excuse to use “virtual mobility” as an alternative to physical mobility. Mentioning “blended mobility” in the same context is less harmful, but on the other hand does not make sense at all: if one travels within a “blended” format, the environmental impact is neither smaller nor bigger than when one travels without an online component.

Digitalisation

To make the learning mobility experience more accessible, optimal and user-friendly to a broad range of participants and organisations, its administrative burden needs to be minimal. Digital and paperless administrative procedures need to be introduced. The European Student Card Initiative will hopefully be a good example of an IT initiative which can make the programme more user-friendly. It is important to mention that all simplification efforts should be further elaborated on to explain what they will look like, what they will accomplish in practice and where they will overlap and be complementary. At the same time, it is essential when integrating digital tools to guarantee that these methods do not, in any way, deprive opportunities to those whose needs differ, as this may lead to inequality and social exclusion. We are glad to see that developing digital skills is set as a priority both in the European Education Area and the Digital Education Action Plan, in order to boost the development of digitised and streamlined procedures and services.

Online learning

When it comes to remote learning and virtual exchange, a combination of physical mobility and online learning in blended learning approaches can increase both the impact and efficiency of the programme in some cases. In addition, if needed due to public health and safety concerns, as was the case in 2020, a virtual cross-border learning environment may be needed. Nevertheless, “virtual mobility” is in our view not a form of mobility, even though the

term has unfortunately entered into the public discourse. As such, it cannot be a substitute for a mobility period abroad. It should be used *in addition* to physical mobility, not as an easy way to reach higher numbers of mobility participants. Remote learning should be an extra element that does not compromise any funding for future physical mobilities. The opportunity to live abroad, learn or improve a foreign language and meet new people were the top three reasons to participate in the Erasmus+ programme, as cited by the students both in 2014⁶ and in 2019⁷ (the years in which the biggest studies on the topic were made). The upcoming programme should make sure that beneficiaries will still get the transactional learning experience and that the three top reasons for participating in the Erasmus+ programme will remain in the core of it.

Accessibility

Mobility opportunities should become visible not only to usual beneficiaries but also reach out to groups that are underrepresented and that are not currently easily reached. Widening the focus of Erasmus+ increases the legitimacy of using European funding for student mobility and enhances its impact on society. The mobile student population should reflect the diversity of the population. Therefore special programmes and funding for students with disabilities and accessibility requirements need to be established, and HEIs should be given additional funding to provide suitable access for those groups. In addition, all students must be provided with adequate support and resources and must be informed about their opportunities. Based on the Inclusive Mobility Alliance recommendations on making the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027 more inclusive “*All information should be inclusive/accessible and should be widely distributed and made available in all centres supporting persons with different needs.*”⁸ Moreover, we recognise a need to address inclusion also in other types of internationalisation activities like more flexible mobility formats, short-term mobilities serving as a ‘motivator’ and ‘taster’ for

⁶ European Commission (2014), *The Erasmus Impact Study: Effects of Mobility on the Skills and Employability of Students and the Internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions*, European Commission. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus2/files/erasmus-impact_en.pdf

⁷ European Commission (2019), *Erasmus+ higher education impact study*, p. 74. Available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/94d97f5c-7ae2-11e9-9f05-01aa75ed71a1>.

⁸ Inclusive Mobility Alliance (2019), *Recommendations on making the Erasmus programme 2021-2027 more inclusive*. Available at : <https://inclusivemobility.eu/ima/booklet>

longer-term mobility, other study programmes taught in different languages and any other opportunity for Internalisation at Home (IaH) to widen inclusion and make sure that international experiences and the intercultural dimension are available for the large majority of students. Nevertheless, this should not replace the efforts to make 'traditional' mobility formats more accessible for students from underrepresented groups and make sure that their impact is not compromised.

Financial Obstacles

The increasing ambitions for internationalisation of education require further investments and funding for the Erasmus+ programme. EU Member States have agreed to fund the Programme with €21.2 billion, a 52.5% increase compared to the previous long-term budget. Recently, the European Parliament budget negotiations and the Council Presidency reached a compromise of providing a €2,2 billion increase to the latter proposal, but at the time of writing this is not confirmed. Even though we are glad to see an effort to secure Erasmus+ from being underfunded, this figure still remains below the Commission's original ask of €26.4 billion, and ever further away from the European Parliament's proposal of €41.1 billion.

To avoid mobility becoming the privilege of a few students with a good financial situation, mobility must be financially supported. Insecurity about the financing is at present the number two deterrent for students to be mobile⁹. Student grants should be high enough to cover actual living costs in the host country and grants should be topped with additional financing to ensure that no barriers are created at any point of the mobility period. The ESNsurvey 2016¹⁰ showed that 70% of students indicated that the grant covered half or less than half of their living costs. A practice that would support the difference of the cost of living between the sending and the host country, would be the distribution of national scholarships for mobility and internalisation initiatives, on top of the funds available from the Erasmus+ programme.¹¹ ESN, together with European University Foundation and European Students' Union, call for a restructuring of the Erasmus grants into a simpler scheme comprising a

⁹ European Commission (2019), *Erasmus+ higher education impact study*, p. 73.

¹⁰ Erasmus Student Network (2016), *The International-Friendliness of Universities*. Available at: <https://esn.org/esnsurvey/2016>

¹¹ Erasmus Student Network (2018), *#ErasmusUpgrade Manifesto, A vision for the future of the Erasmus+ Programme*. Available at https://issuu.com/esnint/docs/erasmusupgrade_manifesto_web_final

universal baseline of 500€/month, through the [#Erasmus500](#) campaign¹². Maintaining specific top-up systems for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those requiring specific assistance through special needs support is also needed. For more information on the position of ESN on the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 budget proposal, please see our previous reaction to the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 budget proposal from May 2020.¹³

Sufficient Information on Mobility

A prerequisite for making an informed mobility choice is access to transparent and comprehensive information. Information provision should be available to all students regardless of their background and their origin area. Higher Education Institutions should provide information about the options, opportunities and availability of mobility programmes. To achieve this, the responsible bodies of the sending and hosting institutions should communicate, develop the dialogues between them and introduce online tools to facilitate the process of information provided to potential exchange students. A successful example of such a tool is the Erasmus+ App, which will provide information on the Erasmus+ Programme opportunities for individuals and offer guidance through the mobility process - from the application phase to the return to their own country.

Student representatives and mobility ambassadors of previous exchange experiences should also be involved in the process. Peer-to-peer approaches should be reinforced and expanded as they are a valuable method to increase the outreach, relevance and quality of information provision and improve the visibility of European education.

Language Obstacles and Multilingualism

As well as the obvious economic advantages, the teaching and learning of foreign languages also have significant cultural and social importance. Learning another language makes mobility an academically and culturally enriching experience, contributing to better integration in the hosting institution and country and to embrace and understand another culture. ESN stands by the aim to continue to support language competences in a lifelong learning perspective by

¹² See <https://erasmus500.eu/>.

¹³ Available at https://esn.org/sites/default/files/news/the_revised_eu_budget_-_is_the_investment_enough_to_make_erasmus_inclusive_and_sustainable_0.pdf.

providing opportunities for teaching and learning mobility periods abroad, through the Erasmus+ programme. Free language courses should be provided at the home institution prior to the mobility period to secure a sufficient level of language knowledge. Also, language courses that are not part of the curriculum or the project, should be at least voluntary, tuition-free and should take into account the needs of the learner. An ESNsurvey conducted in 2014 showed that 66% of students who attended 'Language Tandem' activities improved their local language, compared to only 54.5% of those who did not attend. The same survey showed that 61% of students continue practising their Erasmus languages after their period abroad¹⁴. When it comes to the assessment of language skills and competence in higher education, existing tools, like the Online Linguistic Support (OLS) should be supplemented by creative useful activities in order to provide a more genuine outline of language learning outcomes and assess the learning process.

Geopolitical Dimension

ESN is glad to see that the international dimension of education has an important place in the new communication. The Erasmus+ programme has played a significant role in strengthening the relations of the European Union with the neighbouring countries and the rest of the world. Since the international opening of the Erasmus+ programme in 2015, more than 200.000 students have taken part in International Credit Mobility under the Erasmus+ programme¹⁵. ESN firmly believes that the European Education Area cannot be built with closed borders, but would greatly benefit from building strong cooperation with other countries and continents, enriching the intercultural opportunities for young people.

The establishment of the International Credit Mobility action in the Erasmus+ programme in 2015 was a great start towards this direction but ESN believes that more investment is needed and we welcome the European Commission's intention to widen the association of non-EU countries in the Erasmus+ programme. Students and trainees from non-EU countries are continuing facing obstacles regarding visas and residence permits. Every EU country has

¹⁴ Erasmus Student Network (2014), *International Experience and Language Learning*. Available at <https://esn.org/ESNSurvey/2014>.

¹⁵ European Commission (2019) *Erasmus+ international mobility & cooperation with partner countries worldwide*. Factsheet available at https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/default/files/world-erasmusplus-2019_en.pdf

its own regulations and demands in order to grant visas to non-EU Erasmus+ students which complicates the situation. Therefore, ESN urges the European Commission and relevant member state level decision-makers to tackle the issue by providing a more flexible visa and resident permits requirement for Erasmus+ participants.

We believe that full association of the remaining Western Balkan countries must take place in the context of the new Erasmus+ programme. Students from Western Balkans have shown great interest in participating in the Erasmus+ and the European Union should utilise this opportunity further. ESN, however, raises a bit of caution on the integration model of the Western Balkan countries in the Erasmus+ programme. The financial mechanism of the Erasmus+ programme is built in a way where students from the Erasmus+ partner countries receive higher financial contribution compared to the Erasmus+ programme countries. Changing the status from partner country to a programme country will result in a lower scholarship for students from Western Balkans countries. Serbia is the latest country integrated in the Erasmus+ programme and the transition raised considerable concerns regarding the lower scholarships¹⁶. At the same time, North Macedonia was fully associated with the Erasmus+ programme from the beginning and student mobility remains low in the country¹⁷. Therefore, we believe that the European Commission should take in consideration the socio-economic status of the population of Western Balkan countries and offer adequate Erasmus+ scholarships for the students.

In order to increase the student mobility in Erasmus+ partner countries, ESN urges the European Commission to allocate adequate funding from other EU instruments, notably from IPA and the newly established ENDICI to increase the student mobility opportunities between Erasmus+ programmes and partner countries.

¹⁶ ESN Serbia (2019), *Erasmus+ programme and ESN in Serbia: Reaction paper to the Transition to a Programme Country*. Available at <https://www.esn.rs/media/otici-preko-fantazija-u-2020>.

¹⁷ European Commission (2020), *Erasmus+ 2018 in numbers: North Macedonia*. Available at https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/documents/north-macedonia-erasmus-2018-numbers_en.

The framework

The European Education Area is not yet created, so the framework around it is given a lot of thought in the Communication. The framework will “identify targets and indicators to guide and monitor progress towards the European Education Area” and develop “a new approach to indicators and targets” (p. 25). It is important that these targets and indicators are relevant, clear and measurable, and avoid any kind of box-ticking. ESN regrets to see that there are no indicators and ambitious targets related to student mobility which is a vital element of the European Education Area. Unfortunately, the target of 20% of graduates to have a mobility experience abroad as indicated at the Education & Training Monitor have not been achieved as of today¹⁸. ESN suggests adding similar targets to be achieved by 2025. Moreover, specific targets should be added related to students from disadvantaged backgrounds in order to push Higher Education practitioners to work towards this direction. Sadly, as pointed out above, the current Erasmus+ has enabled only a small number of participants from disadvantaged backgrounds to take part in the Programme. ESN truly believes that this communication and the foreseen initiatives will increase the inclusiveness of student mobility in the years to come.

The role of Student Organisations in building the European Education Area

ESN strongly believes that students and student organisations should play an important role in achieving the objectives of this Communication. The European Education Area should be co-created together with students and other learners. Student organisations can help the European Commission and the Member States by providing the student perspective and sharing their input which can be valuable in order to monitor the progress of the initiative.

We urge the European Commission and the Member states to include student representatives on the Steering Board of the European Education Area as well as to include students in the various experts groups and fora which will tackle different elements of the European Education Area. ESN has 31 years of experience in the field of international

¹⁸ European Commission (2020), *Education and Training Monitor 2020*, pp. 82-89. Available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/92c621ce-2494-11eb-9d7e-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

education and represents hundreds of thousands of international students every year. More specifically, ESN has vast experience in the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme, with member organisations in 42 different countries, including all Erasmus+ Programme Countries. ESN is the leading Erasmus+ alumni association and we are thrilled to see that the role of alumni student organisations is acknowledged in the Communication. We believe that the presence of student representatives from the Erasmus Generation can be proved valuable to achieve the ambitious goals set out in the Communication.

Conclusion

Many of the ideas in the Communication are interesting, ambitious and set out to solve very real problems. In that way, the Communication is a step in the right direction. In order to make these ideas turn into something more concrete than well-intended words on a paper, a lot of work and a proper budget will be needed in the coming years. ESN stands by the idea of having a young adult population that, by 2025, will have understood and embraced the idea of international experience as a component to all learning paths. We will continue our work to enrich society through international students by offering them real opportunities to obtain meaningful international experiences. We hope that other relevant actors in Europe and beyond are equally committed to this.

Policy Considerations

1. ESN is looking forward to seeing a more detailed work plan about the decision of the Commission to provide support to the Member States to put in place the conditions that will make automatic mutual recognition possible by 2025.
2. ESN urges that successful initiatives for the European Universities need to move beyond the testing phases, making sure that more than the current 280 HEIs can benefit from the outcomes and ideally spill over to the entire Higher Education sector at large.
3. ESN believes that student involvement should be increased throughout the years in order for the students to have a meaningful involvement in their European University alliances.

4. ESN supports the idea that mobility programmes, including Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps should be seen as an opportunity to educate a generation of young Europeans on the importance of environmental sustainability.
5. ESN strongly believes that environmental aspects should not be seen as an excuse to use “virtual mobility” as an alternative to physical mobility.
6. ESN stands by the idea that when integrating digital tools it’s crucial to guarantee that these methods do not, in any way, deprive opportunities to those whose needs differ, as this may lead to inequality and social exclusion.
7. ESN strongly supports that virtual learning should be used *in addition to* physical mobility, not as an easy way to reach higher numbers of mobility participants and that the beneficiaries of the upcoming Erasmus+ programme will still get the transnational learning experience.
8. ESN urges the European Commission to increase the student grants to cover actual living costs in the host country and grants should be topped with additional financing to ensure that no barriers are created at any point of the mobility period.
9. ESN calls upon the European Commission and relevant member state level decision-makers to tackle the issue by providing a more flexible visa and resident permits requirement for Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility participants.
10. ESN urges the European Commission to allocate adequate funding from other EU instruments, notably from IPA and the newly established ENDICI to increase the student mobility opportunities between Erasmus+ programmes and partner countries.
11. ESN wishes to see targets for student mobility to be added in the European Education Area by 2025, including specific targets for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, in order to push Higher Education practitioners to increase the inclusiveness of student mobility in the years to come.
12. ESN calls on the European Commission and the Member States to include student representatives on the Steering Board of the European Education Area.