

Fostering active citizenship through Erasmus+ student mobility

Concept

The undersigning organisations would like to see the embedding of a clear component of local volunteering into the Erasmus+ programme for individual student mobility. This should take the form of students being encouraged to engage on a voluntary basis with a local civil society organisation in order to contribute actively to needs in the community where their mobility is taking place.

Background

The Erasmus+ student mobility experience fosters active citizenship as shown in the latest Erasmus Impact Study. This is particularly true for students who participate in local volunteering activities during their stay abroad. Students who actively engage in civil society organisations during their mobility have proven to have a higher engagement with their local community after returning from their mobility as shown in the Erasmus Voting Assessment¹ research. But an extensive engagement of mobile students in local organisations is far from reality. Civil society organisations are missing out on the potential that the international students can bring, and many students don't receive the valuable experience that will help them as citizens and future professionals. By supporting HEIs and civil society organisations, as well as encouraging mobile students, it is possible to fully implement volunteer experiences as a natural part of the Erasmus+ student mobilities.

From existing local volunteering schemas for exchange students, the idea to enlarge the scope and opportunities for exchange students was born. Therefore we believe that the Erasmus+ student mobility experience has the possibility to foster active citizenship, hereby shaping a better future through the generation of young people who have lived a mobility experience as a student. There are benefits for all actors involved. The experience will first of all contribute to a better inclusion of the student into the local community, improve language skills and intercultural competences. It will promote active citizenship, including when returning home. This will help higher education institutions with enabling the reintegration of the student after the exchange. There are also benefits for the civil society organisations and for the local community. The new volunteer brings their own experiences, interests and enthusiasm into the organisation and community.

Volunteering scope

Volunteering activities can take place in several areas with a wide range of causes². In this framework, volunteering should be done within a local civil society organisation. In this way support for the exchange student can be provided and any learning outcomes acquired through the volunteering experience can also be more easily validated.

¹ Final report: Erasmus Voting Assessment Project, Generation Europe Foundation, Brussels, 2014.

² Areas such as: formal and non-formal education and training and informal learning, youth work, employment, gender equality, social entrepreneurship, citizenship and democratic participation, intercultural dialogue, social inclusion, environment and nature protection, climate action, health and well-being, creativity and culture, physical education and sport, social assistance and welfare and reception and integration of third-country nationals particularly asylum seekers and refugees

Concretely the following areas are crucial to foster local volunteering.

1. Information

Information on the possibility of local volunteering opportunities should be available to all students. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Student Organisations play a crucial role in this, as they can act as a platform to collect and disseminate this information before and during the mobility period. A good practice would be the dissemination of information via volunteering fairs organised at HEIs. Testimonials from former active exchange students can be used in the promotion, especially from and to young people with fewer opportunities.

2. Selection procedure of exchange students

A proposal for engagement in a local volunteering project could be acknowledged as an added value to the motivation of the student when selecting outgoing exchange students. Applicants who have already considered local volunteering have a better chance of benefiting from the mobility experience. Recognising the potential contribution of the exchange student as a volunteer in the local hosting community will also make the selection procedure more inclusive than if only academic results are taken into account.

3. Recognition and Validation

As with all extracurricular activities there should be recognition of the engagement as a volunteer and validation of any learning outcomes and/ or skills and competencies gained. A template certificate of participation can be provided by the European Commission and HEI can provide validation of any NFIL according to the possibilities available in each member state. Also giving credits for any learning acquired through volunteering could boost the number of exchange students engaging in local volunteering and would also ensure continuity throughout the mobility period.

4. Capacity Building

Generally speaking, there is a gap between the capacity of many civil society organisations to cope with a potential increase in demand from mobile students. Language barriers, cultural differences, and other factors may make it difficult for a mobile student to fully engage in an organisation and contribute to its cause. By finding measures that can support the organisations in the inclusion of Erasmus+ students, not only will more students be able to engage, it will also create the necessary experience for future engagement. In particular, it is necessary to find methods of supporting capacity building projects in this manner financially.

To encourage HEIs to include active citizenship opportunities as part of the Erasmus+ routine, a range of steps can be taken. The *Erasmus+ charter* for Higher Education (ECHE) should include elements that would encourage institutions to act as intermediaries and support structure between mobile students and civil society. Furthermore, European policy related to Higher Education should consider:

- Encouraging Higher Education Institutions to act as facilitators of active citizenship.
- Promote *quality assurance* for volunteering opportunities supported by European funding. Some minimal impact and quality requirements need to be defined.
- Make active citizenship a policy priority in the framework of Erasmus+ student mobility and beyond.

Pilot

We see great potential if it would be added in the next Erasmus+ programme guide. A pilot with a limited number of HEIs can already be undertaken before the new Erasmus+ programme enters into effect. The SocialErasmus+ project (Erasmus+ Key Action 3 - forward looking cooperation project) can be seen as a good practice in the field and should be extended in its format according to this paper.



The recently launched European Solidarity Corps (ESC) already includes a structure for local part-time / free-time volunteering. The infrastructure provided by the ESC could be utilised to provide Higher Education Institutions and civil society organisations with the necessary platform and resources to further the previous idea. Including an easy process of registration for mobile student is needed. The ESC certification at the end of a placement can be useful as well.

This proposal is supported by undersigning organisations

