European Parliament Erasmus+ 2021–2027 Implementation Report

The Experience of Higher Education Students:
Contribution of the Erasmus Student Network

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The priorities of the programme

The 4 horizontal priorities of the Erasmus+ programme have contributed to making it more strategic and to continue boosting its societal role. The results of the ESNsurvey XV show that both Erasmus+ participants and students who did not take part in the programme yet consider the programme lives up to its priorities.

The high level of attention to the inclusion priority is extremely well received by students, but more measures should be developed at all levels to remove barriers to participation.

Despite the positive perception, and in line with the results of the ESNsurvey, ESN believes that there is a **clear lack of transformative measures to implement the democratic participation and sustainability priorities, which hinders the full potential of the programme.** As an example, the results of the ESNsurvey show that **only 10% of students engage** in volunteering activities during their Erasmus+ mobilities. This lack of engagement with the local community, which continues to be one of the main issues with the programme, could be tackled with better structural support to student and alumni organisations on the ground, better recognition of volunteering opportunities and an enhancement of the tools used to track the learning process of students, such as the learning agreement, which at the moment does not include any reference to the actual competencies learned abroad, but only the courses.

Image 1: Perceptions of Erasmus+ students of the priorities of the Erasmus+ programme. Source: preliminary findings ESNsurvey XV
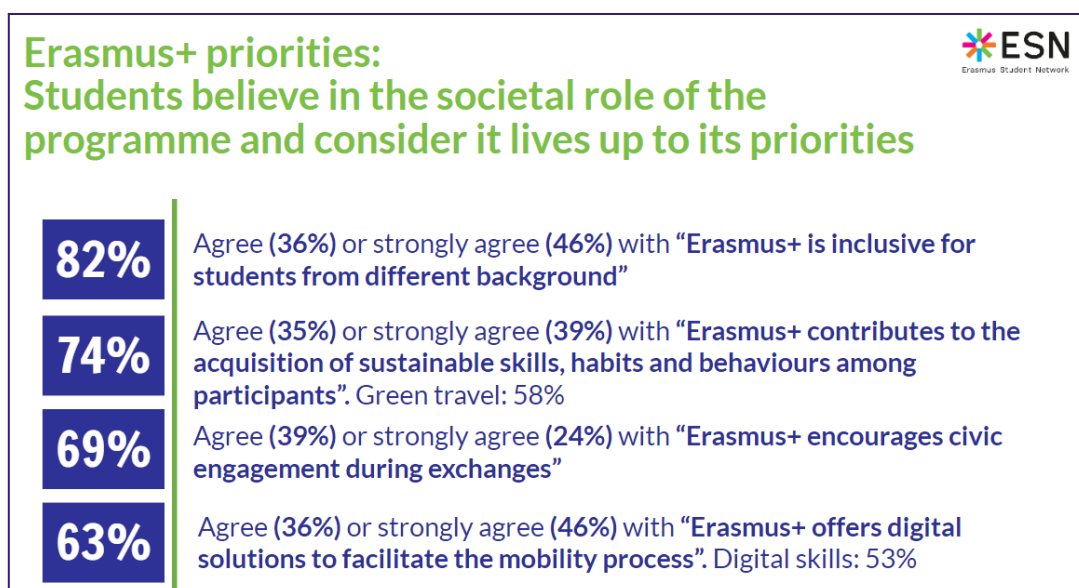
Satisfaction with Higher Education Institutions

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are the ultimate enablers of quality Erasmus+ experiences. In the ESNsurvey XV, ESN asks students for their overall satisfaction with the services provided by sending and hosting Higher Education Institutions.

It is important to highlight that students participating in Erasmus+ continue to be considerably satisfied with the services and support provided by Higher Education Institutions. However, the latest data shows that **overall satisfaction with both sending and receiving higher education institutions is now lower than at the end of the last programming period.**
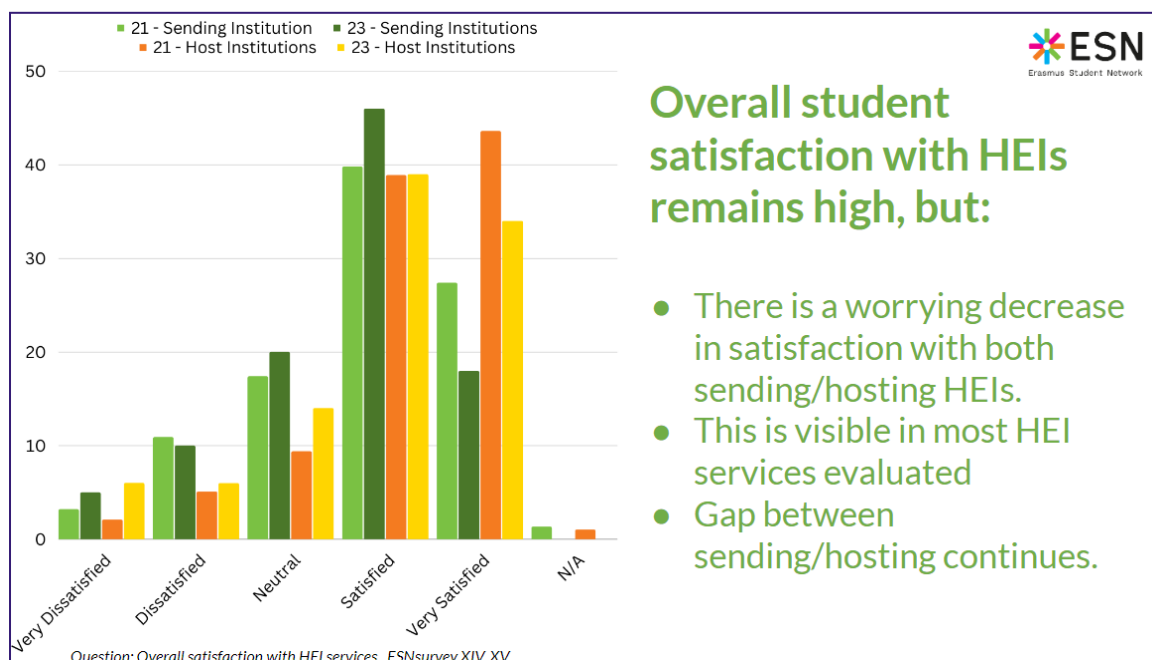

Image 2: Overall satisfaction with HEI services

This data is not alarming and could be attributed to a number of factors, but it is important that it is taken into account. The implementation of new initiatives at the institutional levels should not take the attention away from improving mobility services, as this will not only benefit mobile students but the whole student population through the creation of a more internationalised Higher Education environment.

The Erasmus+ programme architecture should give more incentives to HEIs so they tackle the challenges encountered by students, such as a new Organisational Support mechanism.

The Digitalisation of Mobility

The digitalisation process of mobility has brought some of the main novelties to the new programme. ESN believes that the focus of this process should be to facilitate participation in Erasmus+ through administrative simplification, and to streamline all procedures so students are not discouraged to take part in an Erasmus+ exchange because the process lacks clarity. .

The data gathered by the ESNsurvey shows a varied picture:

- **68%** of students reported having an Online Learning Agreement
- **39%** of students reported that all their mobility procedures were online.
- **6%** of students reported using the Erasmus+ App to obtain information about mobility, and **3%** used it for the application process.

The qualitative section of the survey shows that students who did not have their procedures online express dissatisfaction with the administration of their mobility.

More focus on dissemination and usability of the Erasmus+ App will be needed to make it work for students, as very few seem to have been able to use it for mobility procedures. ESN has advocated for a stronger engagement component in the rollout of the Erasmus+ App, and to use the tool to ensure quality implementation of the programme.

Erasmus+ Grants

There is no inclusive Erasmus+ without decent grants that allow students from different backgrounds to participate in the programme. There are 3 key elements that ensure a quality grant:

- **Clarity in the information and processes to receive the funds:** students should be able to easily understand how their grant will work when it will arrive and what they need to do to receive it.
- **Adequate amount that covers most of the living costs:** low grants make the participation of students with less financial means extremely difficult.
- **Timing of the reception of the grant by the student:** students that receive their grant late can not properly cover initial costs if they don't have other sources of income.

Grant amounts and purchasing power

Preliminary data from the ESNsurvey shows that the average grant amount is now almost 100 euros higher than the one reported in the Erasmus+ Annual Report 2020 (374 euros): 469 euros, with a median of 460. This increase, a product of the implementation of top-ups and the grant increases by National Agencies is a step in the right direction. However, it masks stark differences between countries that are not always related to different purchasing powers, **but rather to the opaqueness grant determination system established in the Erasmus+ Programme guide.**

South-Western European countries have grant levels closer to the minimum. Meanwhile, central and Eastern European countries, both north and south, tend to have higher grant levels.

The decision on the national grant levels should be taken in consultation with student organisations and other stakeholders, considering the trade-offs and providing a transparent assessment of the different factors, such as the national co-financing of the programme. This can be done in the current programming period. The information on different grant levels and the decision-making process should be made publicly available at the European level.
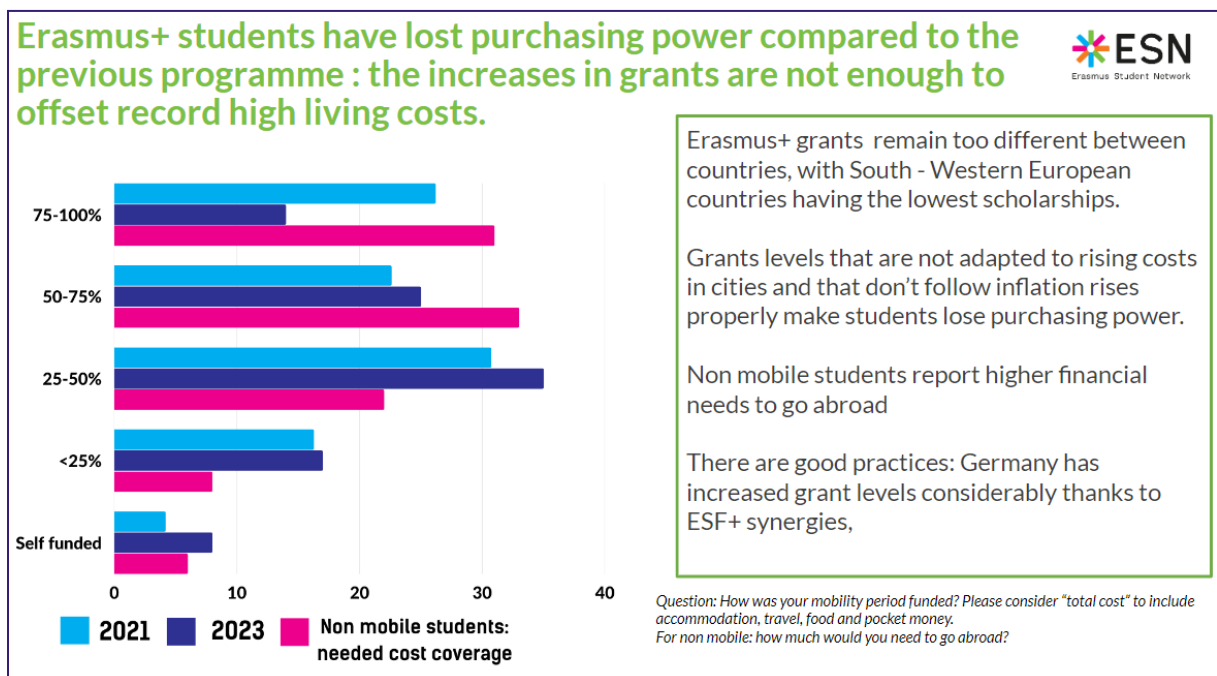

Image 3: Cost coverage of mobile students through grants vs needed cost coverage of non-mobile students. Source: ESNsurvey XV./XIV

Use of top-ups

The top-up system incorporated in the Erasmus+ programme is one of the most important novelties compared to the previous one. **The fewer opportunities for top-up grants seem to be having an important impact, with an average of 10% of the students reporting receiving one. Students who receive the top-up report fewer financial difficulties covering their living expenses, pointing to the partial success of the initiative.** Unfortunately, a comparative analysis of different programme countries shows remarkable differences, confirming the fears of a fragmented grant system that makes Erasmus+ programme opportunities too different depending on where people study.

Unfortunately but predictably, the low amount of the Green Travel top-up **has not led to a substantial increase in the use of sustainable means of travel among mobility students.**

The GreenErasmus petition proposed a new top-up system that could be used to increase the impact of the initiative and has so far gathered more than 5.000 answers.

Image 4: Use of top-up grants by Erasmus students. Source: ESNsurvey XV
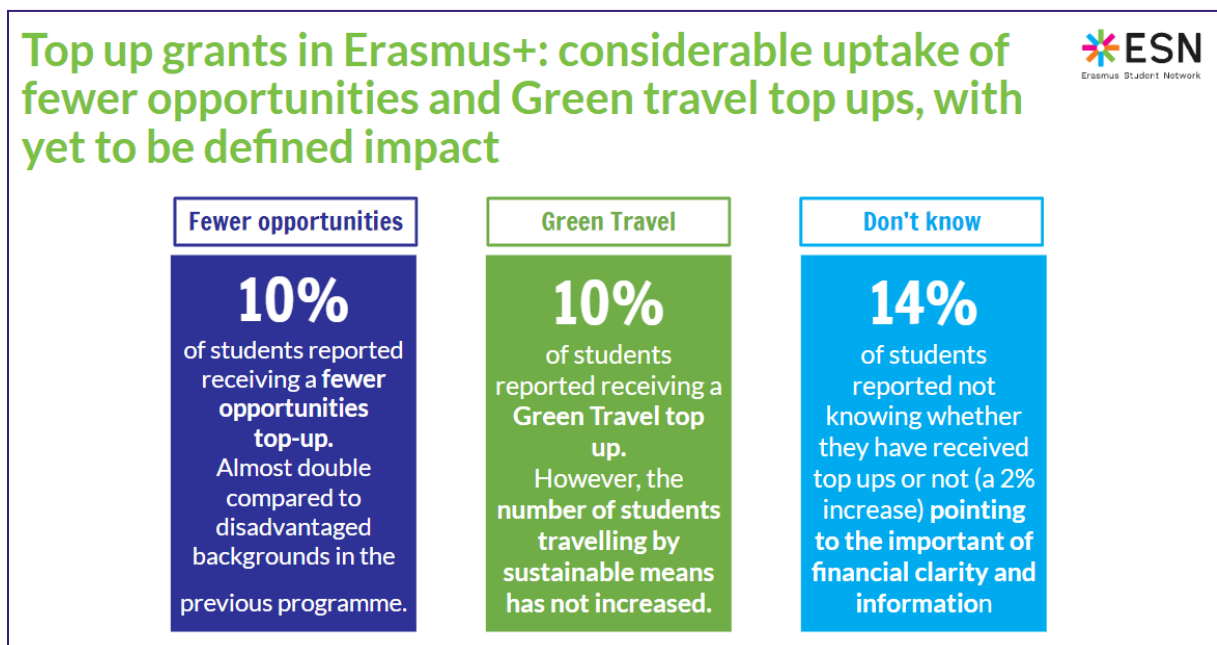
Timing of the grants

Receiving the grants before the beginning of the mobility experience is fundamental to facilitating the participation of students with fewer financial resources, but the new

programme has not brought enough progress in this area. More than a quarter of students report receiving their grants later than one month after the start of their mobility, a percentage that remains similar to the data from the ESNsurvey XIV from 2021. In that sense, national differences are truly unacceptable: in South European countries such as Spain (66%), Italy (40%), or France (49%), receiving their grants later than one month after the beginning of the mobility is the most common situation.

Despite this situation, a considerable percentage of students in those countries receive their grants before departure, which leads to thinking that national regulations are not the actual barrier to advanced grant payments.

The timid improvement in the percentage of students that receive the grants before the start of the mobility shows that changes in administration at the national and institutional levels can improve the situation.
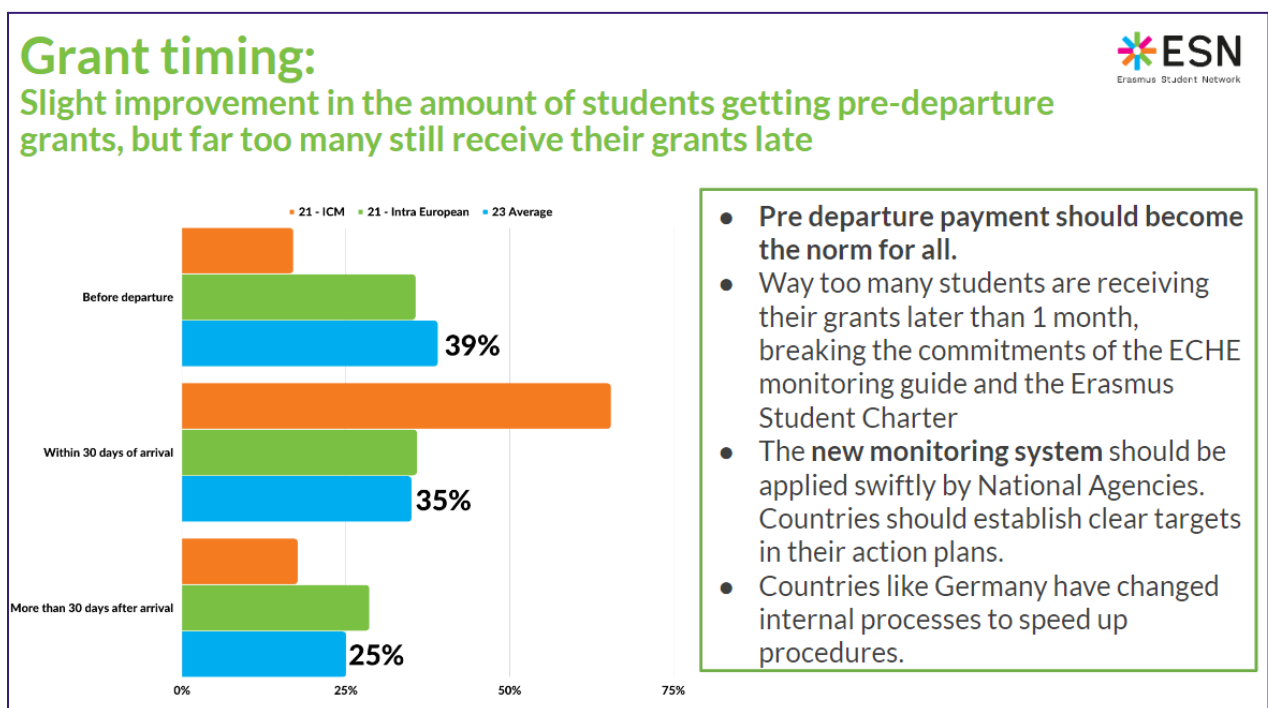

Image 5: Timing of payment of Erasmus+ grants. Comparison between ESNsurvey XIV (2021) and XV (2023)

Main challenges faced by students

Identifying the main challenges faced by the students participating in Erasmus+ is key to developing policy proposals that can address them. The first results of the ESNsurvey in this area point to many similarities to the previous Erasmus+ programme, with **lack of funding (35% of students), challenges finding accommodation (35%) and problems with the courses and other academic aspects, such as recognition or changes in documentation, (34%)** being the three most common issues.

Accommodation-related challenges have become more acute in the last two years. While analysing the results from the [Housing Survey,](link) a study done in partnership with ESU, we understand that more than half of students spent over **400 euros per month on their accommodation.** This is higher than the average Erasmus+ grant in most South European countries. The total housing expenses depend more on the availability of higher education institutions housing than on the country's average price for housing.

Scams and lack of information are also two of the main areas to be addressed in Erasmus+ mobility management. These areas do not depend only on the type of housing available but on the systems set up at the national and institutional levels.

The problems related to the courses seem to be closely **administrative and recognition issues.** The implementation of the priorities of the programme should not decrease the focus on the continuous improvement of mobility management processes.

Lack of funding seems to affect almost a third of the students, showing that the current top-up grants are not reaching all those students who **need them and that the target of 10% is not enough to reach the objective of widening participation in the programme.**

Solving these problems should be a priority to improve the overall quality of the programme since they can affect the mental health of students or their motivation to study. In that sense, 42% of students who suffered issues reported feelings of anxiety and stress, and 37% reported an impact on their motivation to study.

The importance of recognition

Full automatic recognition of learning outcomes from a period of study abroad is imperative for complete and inclusive student mobility. However, currently, the way that credit recognition works shifts the focus of students when choosing their mobility destination from cherishing the richness and variety of courses offered in host institutions to looking for the "perfect match". The preliminary results of the ongoing ESNsurvey XV show that 38% of respondents considered **"Matching courses which can be recognised by my home institution"** as a very important factor to choose their exchange destination, and 29% considered it important, making recognition the second most important factor, only behind the affordability of the hosting city.
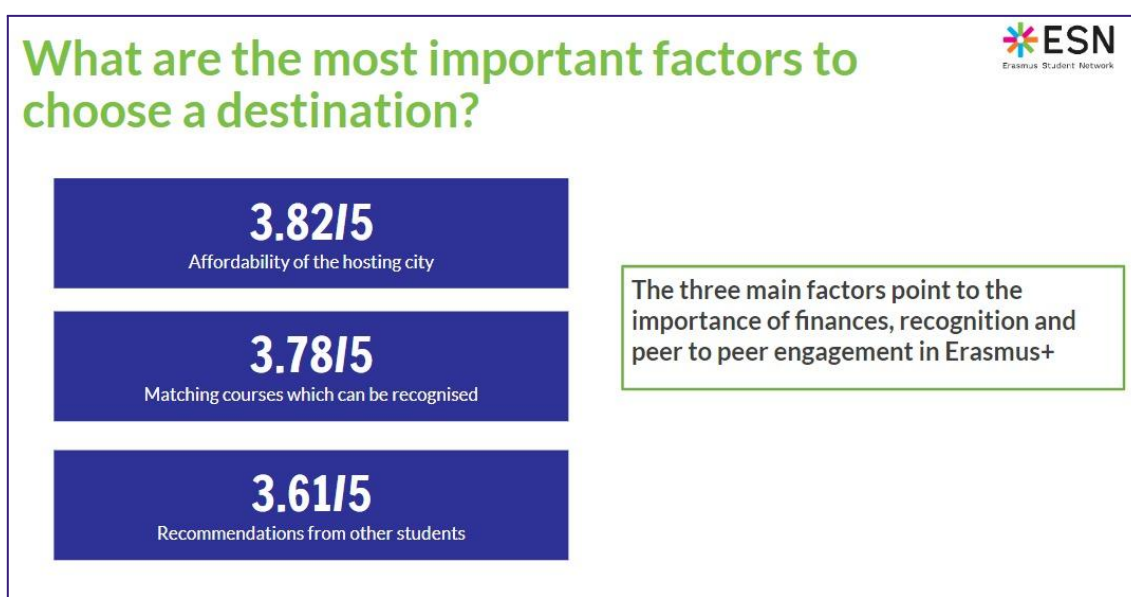

Image 6: Most important factors to choose a mobility destination. Source: ESNsurvey XV (2023)

Credit recognition does not only have a decisive power for the mobility destination selection but it is also perceived as a blocking factor to participation in mobility by 30% of non-mobile students, **especially in the case of students from fewer opportunities backgrounds**, as presented by the data from the SIEM research report (2021).

Once mobility takes place, students continue facing problems with courses they are taking as reported by 34% of respondents in the ongoing ESNsurvey XV, such as issues with enrollment,

scheduling and exams. The complications with recognition become the most visible after mobility, with data from ESNsurvey XIV (2022) showing that **only 71.37% of respondents reported receiving full credit recognition of their mobility period,** although considerable differences exist. The ESN survey qualitative data points to some of the main structural challenges: lack of flexibility in degree programmes, trust issues between partner universities, decision-making power for recognition depending on individual professors, lack of understanding of how the ECTS work, access to information on available courses and pre-departure support in preparations for the learning agreement.

All these challenges concern different aspects of the programme management and implementation both at the HEI and national level, especially in relation to the ECHE commitments. To better account for and counter these existing issues, **stricter ECHE monitoring should be implemented, by also involving student associations and representatives in the process**, especially in countries with lower rates of recognition and satisfaction with the academic experience.

Barriers to participation among non-mobile students and push factors

Achieving the inclusion objectives of the Erasmus+ programme requires an understanding of the barriers faced by students who have not taken part in mobility yet.

The findings show that institutional barriers, as described in the SIEM research report, seem to be the biggest barriers to mobility:

- **Financial constraints stand out as the biggest barrier to mobility**. In that sense, 37% of non-mobile respondents "strongly agree" to these constraints being barriers to their participation, and 35% "agree".
- The limited availability of scholarships is also seen as a barrier to mobility by 62% of non-mobile students. It is also important to highlight that students would like to receive **more information on the type of programmes available** (43% strongly agree, 40% agree).

- **Complex and lengthy application processes** for international student mobility are reported as barriers by 56% of respondents.

The Erasmus+ regulation **highlights the role of Erasmus+ alumni in the promotion of the programme, which is backed by the perspectives of students:** 79% of non-mobile respondents agree (36%) or strongly agree (43%) that "hearing from students who have been abroad" would encourage them to participate in mobility. Unfortunately, there have been very few developments on tangible measures to support these initiatives. ESN considers that new measures funded by the programme, **such as an established funding mechanism distributed by NAs to national and local student and alumni organisations,** could increase access to mobility.

Going against conventional wisdom, **students do not identify the lack of language skills or cultural differences as their main barriers to mobility.**

Many Erasmus+ funded opportunities are not so widely known, limiting potential access. Around **35% of respondents know Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility,** 57**% know Erasmus+ traineeships**, 28% know Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters, 18% know European University Alliances and only 7% report knowing about Blended Intensive Programmes.

The impact of the programme

The Erasmus+ programme continues to build on the huge successes achieved by all its predecessors, helping students to acquire relevant transversal competencies. Students highlight the impact of their mobilities on their personal growth and self-confidence, intercultural communication and language skills, and a better understanding of their hosting communities.

Furthermore, the success of the programme is also linked to the main reasons students decide to participate in mobility. In this way, students are highly motivated to learn about different cultures, learning environments and improve a foreign language.

In this way, we can observe why participating in Erasmus+ also enhances the identification of participants to the European Union, without any decrease in their identification with their countries and regions.

Erasmus+ students consider that access to exchange opportunities like Erasmus+ are very important to them (81% consider it so), as well as the possibility to live, work and study in any other EU Member State (77%). Participating in Erasmus+ makes students strong advocates for a united Europe.

Main suggestions for improvement in the current programme

1. Ensure **pre-departure grant payments** to all Erasmus+ participants, changing the grant agreement and ensuring enforcement through the monitoring of the ECHE and the final reports of mobility projects.

2. **Overhaul the governance system of the Erasmus+ programme at the European and national levels**, enshrining the **participation of students and alumni representatives in the decision-making processes related to opportunities for students (such as the distribution of funding, grant levels and others)** in a potential revision of the Erasmus+ regulation and in the next programmes.

3. **Review the system to allocate Erasmus+ funding to Higher Education institutions in the Erasmus+ programme guide,** moving from a system solely based on past performance to an increased focus on institutional inclusion and more support to HEIs with smaller rates of participation.

4. **Develop sector-specific strategies for the implementation of the participation in democratic life Erasmus+ priority,** including specific funding for engagement and mobility promotion initiatives implemented by alumni for Erasmus students through calls coordinated by National Agencies.

5. Create new incentives for Higher Education Institutions to better implement the principles of the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education and the priorities of the Erasmus+ programme, such as a **new way to allocate extra organisational support to reinforce inclusive mobility, in line with the SIEM technical recommendations.**

6. Prioritise **higher grants for students who need the funding** by **increasing the use of the fewer opportunities top-ups**, and publishing an official report on the different uses of the top-up. Prioritise a more widespread use of this tool.

7. **Review the support measures for sustainable travel** and other sustainability-related measures, implementing the changes proposed in the [Green Erasmus petition](#).

8. Strengthen the ECHE monitoring in the aspects related to full automatic recognition, with a **bigger focus on capacity building and the progress achieved over the programming period**, and by expanding the circle of stakeholders involved in the monitoring process to **student associations and representatives.**

9. Increase the role of the European University Alliances in advancing automatic recognition and making education more flexible, by developing their role in **gathering administrative data from mobility taking place between their HEIs**, and by involving academics in identifying potential challenges and bottlenecks.