

A Student-Centred Vision for the Mediterranean Higher Education

ESN's reaction to the New Pact of the Mediterranean



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Executive Summary

International student mobility plays a vital role in Europe's relations with its neighbours. In 2023, **1.76 million non-EU learners** studied in the EU, representing **8.4%** of all tertiary students, and the EU aims for **23% of graduates** to gain mobility experience by 2030.

Mobility across the Mediterranean is also growing—from **0.6 to 0.77 million students** between 2017 and 2022—though significant imbalances persist, with Southern Mediterranean countries sending far more students than they receive. Evidence shows mobility strengthens skills and employability, with **over 90% of young Europeans** reporting improved language and problem-solving abilities, highlighting the need for **more inclusive and balanced mobility systems** across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Against this backdrop, the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) **welcomes the European Commission's New Pact of the Mediterranean as a significant opportunity to strengthen cooperation between Europe and the Southern Mediterranean through education, mobility, and innovation.** The Pact's people-centred approach, especially its focus on higher education, skills, and youth, aligns closely with ESN's mission to promote inclusive and reciprocal student mobility. ESN views the initiative as a chance to create a truly **shared Mediterranean space where universities collaborate as equal partners**, mobility flows are balanced, and qualifications are transparently recognised. To achieve this, the Pact must ensure equitable access, capacity-building for Southern institutions, and meaningful participation of students and youth organisations in governance and programme design.

Linking education with employability, innovation, and research is essential to ensure that mobility translates into real opportunities and social impact. ESN emphasises that implementation will be key: **clear frameworks for recognition, simplified visa processes, and robust quality assurance are needed to turn ambition into action.** By involving students directly and fostering collaboration among Mediterranean universities, the Pact can transform political vision into tangible outcomes for young people, supporting a more connected, inclusive, and innovative Euro-Mediterranean region.

Introduction

International student mobility is a key pillar of Europe's cooperation with its neighbours. In 2023, **1.76 million international students** were enrolled in EU higher education institutions, accounting for **8.4%** of all tertiary students ([European Commission, Eurostat, 2025](#)). To expand these opportunities, the EU aims for **23% of graduates** to have a learning experience abroad by **2030** ([Council of the EU, 2024](#)). Across the Mediterranean, mobility is increasing: between 2017 and 2022, **student exchanges within the Union for the Mediterranean** countries rose from **0.6 to 0.77 million**, with most students moving within the region or to EU countries ([OECD, Regional Integration in the Union for the Mediterranean 2025](#)). However, **imbalances remain**, as many Southern Mediterranean countries continue to send far more students than they receive. Mobility delivers proven benefits: **over 90% of young Europeans** report improved language and problem-solving skills and view international experiences as essential for their future ([European Education Area, European Commission, 2024](#)). These figures underscore the transformative potential of learning mobility for individuals and societies alike—and the need for inclusive, reciprocal systems that allow all students to participate.

[The new pact of the Mediterranean](#), unveiled on the 16th of October by the European Commission, presents a timely framework to address these challenges. This document appoints the following countries: **Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia** under the banner of a **Common Mediterranean Space**. The initiative falls under the purview of the European Commission's mandate letter and aligns with the ongoing priorities of DG MENA (Directorate-General for Middle East and North Africa), underlining its political and strategic significance for Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and aligning with the political priorities outlined in the [Commission's mandate letter](#).

As the Erasmus Student Network, a Europe-wide student and alumni network supporting the Internationalisation of higher education in Europe and beyond, we welcome the ambition of the Pact and recognise significant opportunities within it. As the Erasmus Generation voice, ESN is fostering our presence in the region through partnership and collaboration with key stakeholders like the [Union for the Mediterranean](#), [our joint event with the Union of Mediterranean Universities](#) and the [Anna Lindh Foundation](#). The Pact highlights three main pillars to achieve in its new version, with relevance to higher education and youth, situated

within its broader thematic structure. It is one of the first times where people put out first, as a ***driving force for change, connections and innovation***, and we welcome this human-centred approach. We will focus mainly on the first pillar, **Education, Skills, Mobility, Research & Innovation**.

Under the first “People” pillar, the Pact explicitly highlights higher education, vocational training, skills development, research and innovation as key domains. It notes that youth in the Mediterranean are eager to **engage in higher education and mobility**, yet face obstacles such as lower graduation rates, uneven recognition of qualifications, and limited access to employment and entrepreneurship. This framing conveys that cooperation is not only economic or technical, but fundamentally about people, especially youth, and their agency. The Pact states that **cooperation with universities, training institutions, research infrastructures, industry and cultural actors** will be supported to position the region “as a hub for transnational education, innovation, research and development”. It also mentions the launch of a new “Mediterranean platform on higher education”.

Finally, the Pact emphasises **mobility** (people, ideas, students, researchers) and addresses **recognition of qualifications, skills**, access to labour markets and connectivity of higher-education networks. Investment in research and technology infrastructures, and collaboration across sectors, is foreseen.

ESN's Perspective: Strengthening Higher Education & Mediterranean Universities

Considering ESN's contribution to promoting student mobility and internationalisation of higher education in the Mediterranean basin through **advocacy and policy activities** like the Mediterranean Student Summit, co-organised with UNIMED, it is crucial to acknowledge the pivotal role these initiatives play in fostering intercultural dialogue and long-term cooperation across the region. Our expertise has been translated to tangible actions through the policy recommendations and data-driven evidence from [How to become an active Mediterranean student?](#), which are the recommendations from the 3rd Mediterranean Student Summit (MSS) celebrated in Palermo, in September 2024 and [The Future of Higher Education in the Mediterranean: The Student's Perspective](#), which are the recommendations from the 2nd MSS celebrated in Tangier, in September 2023. In addition, our statement is also aligned with the

evidence-based data highlighted in [our latest research paper about the rebuilding of Higher Education in a geopolitical conflictive zone](#), as is the case of the Mediterranean.

In this sense, we see the Pact as a key opportunity to reinforce higher education, youth engagement, and intercultural exchange and student collaboration across the Mediterranean. In this context, we would like to share the following reflections and positions:

- **A strong opportunity for student and institutional mobility**

The Pact's focus on higher education, recognition, mobility and collaboration is very much aligned with [ESN's mission](#). The proposal for a "Mediterranean platform on higher education" is especially encouraging. If designed well, this platform could enlarge opportunities for students from Mediterranean universities to participate in exchanges, joint programmes with European institutions, research collaboration, and vice versa. From ESN's perspective, this means:

- **Strengthening partnerships between universities on both shores of the Mediterranean**, including and leading to new joint curricula, student exchanges, and shared research projects.
- **Ensuring recognition of qualifications and smooth academic credit transfer**, so that mobility is meaningful and not isolating for students from or to Mediterranean universities.
- **Expanding student support structures (pre-departure, intercultural training, local networks) so that mobility becomes inclusive and accessible** – especially for under-represented groups in the Mediterranean (women and students with fewer opportunities).
- **Encouraging the participation of ESN sections, local student associations, and networks of students** in the implementation of these initiatives, helping to ground them in student experience. Indeed, a tangible contribution can be the design of a joint platform of alumni and students in the region, like ESN has been doing since 2022 with the Mediterranean Student Summit. It's important to highlight the role of **Erasmus+ Students and Alumni**, who are a vast network with direct experience.

- **Emphasising inclusivity and equal partnership**

ESN welcomes the language of co-ownership, co-creation and partnership, highlighting joint responsibility rather than one-sided assistance. In the context of higher education, this means avoiding a "top-down" model where European institutions simply "add" Mediterranean

partners, but rather genuinely co-design programmes together with partner universities and student bodies in the region. For ESN, this implies:

- **Ensuring that mobility flows are equal.** This involves European students engaging with southern universities, and vice-versa, so that knowledge, culture and experience flow equally in both directions. Current data shows a significant imbalance; for instance, under the Erasmus+ programme in 2022, **only about 1 in 4 students** (approximately 26,000 inbound vs. 6,800 outbound) moving between the EU and the Southern Neighbourhood region were EU students heading south. A truly reciprocal partnership requires closing this gap to ensure knowledge, culture, and experience flow equally in both directions.
- **Being attentive to the structural inequalities** (resources, infrastructure, recognition frameworks) that may limit full participation of some Mediterranean institutions or students, and advocating for capacity-building and support where needed.

- **Linking mobility & education with employability and skills for the future**

The Pact rightly connects higher education and skills with labour market access, innovation and economic transition. For ESN, this connection is vital: it is not enough to make students travel around, we must ensure that their time abroad or on exchange adds real value – academically, personally and professionally. Thus, ESN supports:

- **Empowering students to acquire the skills of the future**, especially green and digital skills, through mobility that will prepare them for an evolving Mediterranean labour market.
- **Integration of mobility programmes with career services, internships, entrepreneurship opportunities and research collaborations** that reflect the evolving economy of the Mediterranean region (e.g., green technologies, digital innovation, blue economy).
- **Ensuring that mobility programmes are accessible to all**, not only students already well-supported or advantaged. This requires proactive measures, such as actively promoting opportunities through channels that reach underrepresented groups, for example, by partnering with student associations from non-capital cities, conducting information sessions in national languages, and leveraging social media campaigns that feature diverse role models.

- **Establishing structured mentorship programmes** in the form of 'buddy systems', that pair prospective mobile students with returned Erasmus+ programme alumni who can provide peer-to-peer guidance and demystify the experience.
- **Ensuring flexible academic arrangements**, such as offering online language courses for less commonly taught languages and providing clear guidance on credit recognition processes and housing options *before* departure.
- Providing support for students with care responsibilities, ensuring accessible infrastructure for students with disabilities, and simplifying application procedures to remove unnecessary barriers to participation..
- **Promoting research and innovation partnerships between Mediterranean universities and European institutions that include student involvement** (e.g., via undergraduate research opportunities, joint master's programmes, summer schools) and that address regional challenges (climate resilience, water, renewable energy, migration) – thereby giving meaning to the “Common Mediterranean Space”.

Risks and caveats: implementation, equality, recognition, and student voice

While ESN is optimistic, we also raise several important caveats:

- The Pact's success hinges heavily on implementation, especially **the action plan, institutional buy-in, funding, monitoring, and student-centred design**. Without these, lofty ambitions may remain symbolic. Indeed, [some analysts caution that](#) past Euro-Mediterranean initiatives struggled to translate into impact.
- Recognising and addressing the structural disparities among universities in the Mediterranean (e.g., infrastructure, resources, and administrative capacity) is essential for meaningful partnership. To avoid deepening existing disparities, mobility **programmes must prioritise equitable capacity building**. This means dedicating specific resources and tailored support to less-advantaged institutions, enabling them to become robust and equal partners in the exchange.
- **Student support and the recognition of mobility** require transparent and trusted mechanisms for recognising both degrees and credits are essential. Without them, outward mobility risks discouraging participation or placing excessive academic

burdens on students. While the Pact mentions recognition, practical measures are urgently needed, particularly given that many countries in the region lack a functioning ECTS or comparable system. ESN calls for the ratification and implementation of the Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, ensuring that recognition procedures are free of charge and based on the principle of automatic recognition, unless substantial differences can be demonstrated.

- For **joint and double degrees**, recognition must go hand in hand with strong quality assurance, coordinated through networks such as ENIC-NARIC and the ANQAHE (Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), and fully involving students in quality assurance processes. Properly quality-assured programmes are essential to building mutual trust between institutions on both shores of the Mediterranean, enabling smoother recognition and deeper academic cooperation. In this regard, the development of the European Degree and the European Degree Label can serve as valuable references for creating comparable frameworks and standards, promoting transparency, and facilitating mutual recognition within and beyond the EU. ESN stands ready to support the development and monitoring of these mechanisms, ensuring that students' voices shape recognition policies from the outset.
- Should the **Mediterranean University** initiative be developed on the model of the **European University Alliances**, it has to be approached as a **long-term objective**, given that the first-generation Alliances have only undergone **mid-term evaluations**, and no final assessment has yet been conducted. Careful design, informed by existing experiences, will be essential to ensure the initiative's success and sustainability. ESN further recommends the establishment of an **advisory board for the Euro-Mediterranean alliances**, comprising students from both shores as well as key stakeholders within the network. Student representation must be guaranteed on this board to ensure that student perspectives inform governance, mobility programmes, and strategic priorities from the outset.
- **Visa issues**: more concrete measures are needed to streamline visa procedures for students and young people to ensure that students and staff can take part in Erasmus+ mobility. Simplified, faster, and more predictable visa processes are essential to enable meaningful exchange and collaboration.

- **The Youth Parliamentary Assembly for the Mediterranean** should be governed by democratically elected representatives and/or members drawn from the most representative youth organisations within their respective field of interest, to ensure legitimacy and accountability. Particular attention should be given to the involvement of European Southern National Youth Councils and the [European Youth Forum \(YEF\)](#), as their participation is crucial for fostering inclusive, balanced, and representative youth engagement across the Euro-Mediterranean region.
- Rather than establishing a separate **Mediterranean Civil Service**, consideration should be given to allocating resources toward expanding already existing platforms, such as the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). Fragmentation of initiatives risks creating confusion and dispersed information, which may ultimately disadvantage students. Given that, from 2028, ESC will fall under Erasmus+ with partial association, a more integrated approach focusing on mobility and student access is preferable, ensuring clarity, coherence, and maximum benefit for participants.
- **Student participation and civil-society engagement:** ESN insists that student organisations and networks must be included from the outset – not as afterthoughts. The Pact refers to this, but the detail and resources will matter. Clearer guidance and stronger commitments are needed to ensure that young people and their organisations have a real voice in shaping priorities and actions. ESN stands ready to contribute and hopes to play an active role in defining the future of EU-Mediterranean collaboration.
- Educational cooperation must be accompanied by attention to **the broader political, governance, and socio-economic context**, since structural barriers (migration restrictions, visa issues, inequality, and funding) cannot be addressed through education alone.

Conclusions

The Pact for the Mediterranean represents a significant opportunity to strengthen higher education, mobility, and cooperation across the region. Its emphasis on youth, intercultural exchange, and people-centred collaboration aligns closely with ESN's mission to foster inclusive, meaningful, and reciprocal student mobility.

For the Pact to achieve its full potential, implementation must go beyond ambition: **students and universities on both shores must be placed at the centre**. Mobility should be equitable, accessible, and supported by transparent recognition frameworks, streamlined visa processes, and robust quality assurance mechanisms. Southern Mediterranean universities must be treated as **equal partners**, with the necessary resources and capacity-building to engage fully in co-designed initiatives. Student participation should be guaranteed at every level, from advisory boards to the design of programmes, ensuring that the voices of those directly affected shape policies and practices.

By facilitating student involvement, supporting mobility programmes, and fostering connections between Mediterranean universities and European students and youth networks, we can help ensure that the Pact delivers tangible benefits for students, universities, and societies alike.

Ultimately, the success of the Pact will be measured not by declarations or platforms, but by **real, inclusive, and sustainable opportunities for young people to learn, collaborate, and innovate across the Mediterranean**. ESN looks forward to working with higher-education institutions, regional partners, civil society, and the European Commission to transform this vision into a lasting reality.



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