

ESN reaction to the Green Paper

Introduction

Erasmus Student Network is one of the biggest non-profit international student organizations. ESN is present in 318 Higher Education Institutions from 32 countries, counting approximately 12.000 active members working on the volunteer basis with 150.000 international students per year. ESN works for the creation of a more mobile and flexible education environment by supporting and developing the student exchange from different levels, and providing an intercultural experience also to those students who cannot access a period abroad ("internationalisation at home").

ESN's vision is the enrichment of society through international students. ESN believes that through the mobility of young people (and international students in particular), the whole society benefits – learning about different cultures and traditions, becoming more open-minded and tolerant and encouraging intercultural dialogue and understanding.

The main aims and goals of ESN and its members are:

- work in the interest of international students
- work to improve the social and practical integration of international students
- represent the needs and rights of international students on the local, national and international level
- provide relevant information about mobility programmes
- motivate students to study abroad
- work with the reintegration of homecoming students
- contribute to the improvement and accessibility of student mobility
- care about its members
- value volunteering and active citizenship

ESN works at several levels – local, national and international. Local sections are directly involved with the international students. The sections support their integration to the local society, help them with practical and academic issues and organise various activities (such as cultural and social events, language projects and mentor system) in order to help them benefit from their exchange period to its utmost.

At the international – European – level, ESN conducts several research projects in order to investigate into the biggest obstacles and barriers to the mobility as reported by the international students. In this way and also through direct contact with international students, ESN can get a better insight into their situation and represent better their needs and rights towards the relevant stakeholders.

Additionally, ESN works for and with local students, be it those who have just returned from their exchange period, or those who have not been abroad. Involving these students in the work with international students, ESN facilitates the reintegration process of homecoming students, or offers the possibility of internationalisation at home to those who have not yet spent a certain time abroad.

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ESN Vision on Mobility

Being the biggest organisation in Europe representing interests of international students, Erasmus Student Network is highly concerned with mobility of students at the tertiary educational level.

Having said this, ESN welcomes the Green Paper consultation as a first and very important step towards better mobility of young people, and students in particular. In spite of the general consensus on the benefits and advantages of mobility, there are still far too many problems and obstacles to the mobility. It is high time to point them out, look for their causes and more importantly for remedies.

In this framework, ESN strives for a world where increasingly more young people will be in the condition to access the opportunities of personal growth, either by moving or by staying at home, offered by an international experience in Higher Education.

However, ESN believes that a **mobility experience has to be one of quality**. Prospective and current international students have to be provided with all the necessary information and means in order to successfully prepare, carry out and benefit from their stay abroad.

ESN believes that all international students have to have the opportunity to:

- choose the destination that fits at most with their interests and personal development
- integrate in the society and the culture of the hosting city (both in linguistic and social point of view)
- succeed in the academic aims of their stay (including full recognition of their courses and gained knowledge upon return)
- reintegrate in the social and academic life of their home higher education institution (HEI) upon return
- evaluate their exchange experience and have their evaluation considered and appreciated by the competent institutions, in order to foster and influence the evolution of the exchange programmes and policies
- help, in turn, other students in succeeding in their exchange study

Hence, ESN foresees a world where all the Higher Education Institutions support the principle of students helping students, who therefore find their way to mobility and to internationalisation more easily, and where all existing and possible threats and obstacles to mobility are eradicated.

While speaking about **mobility of young people**, ESN refers to mobility:

- of students at the tertiary educational level
- within and outside the European Union
- within and outside European mobility programmes
- long-term study mobility – at least three months

Answers to the Green Paper questions

ESN welcomes the consultation initiative by the European Commission on the mobility of young people. Despite the consensus by many stakeholders on the advantages and benefits of mobility, actions are lacking to improve the quality and access to mobility. It is thus crucial that the problems and obstacles are pointed out so that the appropriate steps could be taken.

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Taking into consideration the main target audience of ESN – the higher education students – ESN identifies the **recognition problems** as one of the, if not the biggest obstacle for mobility. Many students (and mainly those coming from a socially or economically disadvantaged environment where the resources are limited and the pressure on them graduating in time is high) cannot risk prolonging their studies and “losing” a semester through mobility.

Furthermore, the mobility is still accessible to a very small percentage of students and young people. The mobility schemes as they are designed now rather contribute to the mobility as an opportunity for the chosen ones than an open and accessible opportunity for everyone. It is further questionable if those students who have the access to mobility benefit from the experience as much as would students who might be not considered excellent but for whom the mobility experience would be a true eye opener. ESN thus recommends that **all the actors in the field of mobility**, including the business world, national governments and regional and local authorities, **mobilise their resources** and allow access to all those who are interested in enduring a period of their life abroad – be it for study or work reasons.

1. PREPARING FOR A PERIOD OF LEARNING MOBILITY

1.1. Information and Guidance

Information concerning learning mobility (funding opportunities, learning opportunities for young people and practical guidance) is scattered all around Internet and there are far too many websites providing information to prospective mobile young people.

This results in a general disorientation and eventually lack of knowledge about the opportunities for mobility programmes, the support given, and, in particular, about the advantages that could be taken from such an experience.

A **clear, comprehensive, easily accessible and updated collection and presentation** of the information on learning mobility is fundamental to prevent students not being able to find a suitable programme and subsequent discouragement to be mobile all together.

ESN suggests that all relevant actors are obliged to take their part of the responsibility to provide both the information, and especially the guidance to the students, which is lacking. Possible ideas and solutions are listed below:

- The international relations office (IRO) of the HEI should be the first contact point. It is essential that the staff is **well trained and informed** in order to provide advice and guidance to interested students (e.g. the staff should be able to refer the student to a more relevant source of information).
- HEIs' websites should obligatory contain links to external sources of information on mobility programmes.
- HEIs should develop a database of their bilateral agreements, presenting clearly all possibilities and actions to be taken for a student to become mobile (incl. application procedure, deadlines, requirements, timeline etc.)
- The **National Agency** should act as a main provider and "gatherer" of the information for HEIs and for their international offices – so that the institutions can easily access the information and pass it to the students later on.

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- **The student advisors and professor** should be highly involved in providing information to the students – as the peer-to-peer learning is usually much more efficient and students can obtain very relevant information which might influence their choice of going abroad. The professors on the other hand could be another point of reference for the student to help him with academic decisions and for encouragement. Again, it is very important that the student advisors and professors are well trained and instructed to assure the quality of the guidance provided.
- Information should be also **provided by peers** (students who have either been mobile, or international students who are at the moment studying at the HEI). Students can provide a very different point of view and information on the less formal aspects of being mobile.

ESN sections are often involved in provision of information on the mobility programmes and opportunities to the local students, involving the present exchange students, as well as local students who experienced the mobility themselves. There are several types of informational activities run by majority of ESN sections:

- **Study Abroad Fairs / Info Markets:** Local ESN sections (usually in the cooperation with HEI) organise a fair involving current international students at the HEI who present their home country and HEI to the local students (including the courses or curricula offered at the HEI). The students are better equipped to answer very specific questions and provide additionally very personal point of view, not only on their home HEI, but especially on the mobility experience itself.
 - **ESN Carlos III (Spain):** The local section holds every year a meeting gathering the future outgoing local students with the current incoming students. It allows for interaction – local students can ask for practical information. In many cases, it is also a great occasion for the local students to have a first contact person in the host country, with the similar mobility experience and background knowledge (since the contact knows both countries, cultures, habits and educational systems).
- **Informing the pupils in high schools:** in several ESN countries (ESN Czech Republic, ESN Poland), the local members together with some of the international students attend language classes at high schools (or specially organised sessions on mobility opportunities). The main aim is to show the high school students the benefits of the period abroad and motivate them to plan a mobility period in their future educational path, already while finishing their secondary education.

Furthermore, based on the results of the PRIME research (see 2.2 recognition) and other direct experience, ESN suggests that following means and steps to provide information are used:

- **Student reports** which each former Erasmus students has to fill in upon return should be more promoted and made public to a broader audience.
- Providing information through **personal contact** (such as presentations, informational sessions or bilateral counselling) is more efficient than flyers or websites.
- The IROs of HEIs should refer students to other students or student organisations that could provide them with relevant information to ensure the balance between academic and non-academic information.
- There should be **sufficient number of staff in the IRO** so that each person could focus on a specific area / region / programme and provide more detailed and precise information to interested students.

1.2. Promotion and motivation

ESN perceives that one of the main problems concerning the promotion and motivation of young people to become mobile is **the lack of knowledge of the benefits of mobility**. Everyone is very aware of all the obstacles and barriers mobility brings, however, the benefits are very little advertised and promoted.

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It is important that the **benefits are clearly defined and targeted** on a specific group of young people so that the group understands immediately what the difference mobility brings will be.

In order to decrease the anxiety of going abroad and possible stereotypes of the problems among local students, ESN suggests that the **contact between international and local students** is boosted at every HEI. Mobile students experiencing the beauty and benefits of mobility themselves are usually the best promoters of such an experience towards their fellow students. For instance, ISN Bayreuth (Germany) involves international students in the marketing and promotion of the mobility.

Additionally, it is essential for the promotion of the mobility that interested students are encouraged by their professors, advisors and teachers. There is nothing more discouraging than a professor who insists that students should take his course at home without going anywhere.

Good practices often used by ESN or experienced at certain HEIs are listed below:

- Mobility programmes presented also as a **cultural exchange and experience** which gives students an opportunity to learn a new language.
- Emphasis on the importance of any mobility experience in the **CV and for the future career** to increase one's chances on the labour market.
- The **promotion** of mobility programmes should occur immediately **at the very beginning of studies**. Preferably, high school students should be presented the mobility experience in an informal way to raise their interest and knowledge and motivate them to go (see 1.1 information and guidance – ESN members and international students informing pupils at high schools)
- **Personal contacts and stories** are much more persuasive than any other way of advertising. Involving students who successfully participated in mobility programme should be integral part of the promotional campaign.
 - ESN Tallinn (Estonia): the local section creates at the end of each semester so-called ESNDiary where all the international students are asked to write about their experience and best memories. It serves both as a nice souvenir for the international students as well as a promotional material for local students to show them how exciting the mobility experience could be.
 - International students should attend classes together with the local students to encourage their contact and interaction.
- Usage of **social networks** (such as Facebook) and **peer pressure** more than simple advertising. If a student sees all their friends leaving for an exchange, they might decide to go as well, in order to be accepted by the group and community.
- **Billboard campaign** to raise general knowledge about a specific mobility programme / benefits of mobility in general (e.g. similar campaign took place in F.YR.O. Macedonia).

As far as the barriers are concerned, ESN sees the following reasons:

- **Lack of funding**; it is not only a matter of scholarships. Students would also need to quit their jobs (done simultaneously with their study) and the uncertainty of re-establishing their financial sustainability upon return from exchange can persuade them not to take part.
- **Lack of knowledge of the benefits** of mobility and extensive focus on the problems.
- Problems concerning the **recognition** and fear to lose a semester (see 2.2)

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- Non-matching courses and inflexibility of HEIs to recognise competencies rather than description of courses.
- Bologna process and the division of Bachelor and Master programme – students have difficulties to finish their studies in time and fit in the mobility period.
- **Linguistic obstacles**; in certain countries, the knowledge of the local language is crucial to participate (see 1.3)
- **Limited variety and offer** of mobility possibilities.

Additionally, ESN has witnessed certain rules at some of the HEIs which make it extremely difficult for students to become mobile:

- Students are allowed to take **part in a mobility programme only during their Master** programme. However, at this moment, many of them have serious relationships or stable job and thus their motivation to go abroad is very low.
- Students are obliged to take their **exams only during a special exam period** – thus for some, this results in no mobility in order to avoid delays in their studies.
- Some HEIs **refuse to promote mobility programmes or organise info meetings** as they do not see any direct benefits for themselves.
- Bigger institutions do not want more Erasmus / exchange students – thus they increase requirements for these students or offer only very limited support.

1.3. Languages and culture

ESN acknowledges the crucial role of acquiring foreign language and intercultural skills through mobility. However, ESN believes that in order to ensure that the learning takes place, it is fundamental that those processes are well prepared and students guided.

In ESN's experience, it is mandatory for the success of language and cultural learning that the interaction and integration of international students with the local ones and in the local community takes place.

In this regards, ESN recommends that:

- HEIs **promote and offer language courses** for the local students and involve the exchange students to make them more attractive.
- All exchange students should be given the possibility and get motivated to learn the local language (through intensive language preparation prior to the mobility experience or during the introduction week).
- Exchange and international students shall be **free to decide in which language they wish to undertake their courses**. The HEI should secure a sufficient offer of courses, both in English and in the local language.
- **Peer to peer learning** is promoted among the international and local students. Many local sections of ESN organise different language learning modules:
 - Tandem programme (learning of languages in a couple when students exchange their language skills and one teaches the other their native language).
 - Language cafes (a group of international and local students meet in an informal setting to talk about different topics in two or three preselected languages)
 - Language classes organised by international students for the local students

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Cultural integration proves to be essential in order for international students to benefit from their stay abroad. ESN sections organise many **cultural activities** in order to enhance the understanding of their host society and culture by the international students. Such activities include cross-cultural evening, movie evenings, visits to local museums and theatres etc.

One of the best practices shared by many sections and ESN members are so-called “cross cultural evenings”. International students from one country or region prepare an evening with dinner, presentation of the culture, music etc. for interested local students and their fellow exchange students.

Additionally, ESN recommends that the integration of international and local students is supported and ensured at different fields and levels – e.g. mixed accommodation, mixed classes at the HEI etc. It is also important that upon arrival to a new country and culture, the international students have a possibility to participate in an intercultural training and are provided information on specificities and traditions of their host country.

1.4. Legal issues

The legal obstacles are mostly a problem for non-EU students who want to study in Europe. Nevertheless, there are still obstacles to the mobility within the EU. The obstacles which ESN has witnessed could be divided into three categories: legal obstacles **before, during and after** the stay abroad.

- Legal obstacles **before** the stay abroad
 - Problems and bureaucracy connected to acquiring visa and residence permits represent a huge barrier to mobility. It is not only the length of the procedure but its financial aspects as well. Moreover, different nationalities and groups are treated differently (some more preferentially than the others).
 - Often, HEIs do not provide sufficient assistance and information.
 - **Insurance issues** might also be a barrier as shows the example from Finland. About one year ago, a law stating that all international students coming from outside EEA have to have insurance from Finland before coming was passed. However, only few companies offer such an insurance package for international students and it has been very hard for the exchange students to find those companies and get insured.
- Legal obstacles **during** the stay abroad
 - Students often experience **many vicious circles** concerning their settling down (e.g. they cannot rent a flat without being registered, but for registering, it is inevitable to have a postal address, and thus a flat).
 - Many civil and public officers have **poor language skills**, which makes all the procedures more complicated. In addition, not all information is available in English or another widely spoken language.
 - In some cases, international and exchange students are not aware of certain specific local laws (and their strictness) and thus expose themselves to unnecessary legal risks.
 - In some countries, local laws demand that courses are taught in the local language. Consequently, the lack of classes in English constitutes an obstacle for mobility.
 - For instance, in Latvia, there is a law for HEIs, which states that all programmes at state institutions have to be in Latvian (with certain exceptions for EU languages concerning special programmes for foreigners).
- Legal obstacles **after** the stay abroad

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- They are mostly connected to the **recognition of the credits**. Despite mentioning this problem in 2.2, it is important to point out that the learning agreement constitutes a legal contract between the students and both home and host institution. The adherence of HEIs towards this contract should be better monitored and appropriate steps taken in case of breach.

ESN urges that the **visa and other bureaucratic procedures** for students within mobility programmes are **simplified or abolished**. This might help prevent bad practices from countries that deny visa to students from e.g. Turkey because their grant was not sufficient financial support.

Additionally, as a good example from certain ESN sections, **there should be support structures offered to students who encounter problems with legal issues**. For instance, ESN VSE Prague assists to all the students who need to ask for a residence permit by collecting all the information and documents for the students in advance, and submitting requests of all the students at once. The experience has been all in all positive as this designated help person is likely to be more helpful and patient than police or local administration officers. HEIs and local organisations should provide all the necessary information regarding the local rules and regulations to the incoming students in order to prevent any problems later.

1.5. Portability of Grants and Loans

Financial problems can be decisive in the choice to attend a mobility program abroad. Many students are discouraged by the costs and the low support they get from the HEI, especially facing all the expenses connected to the beginning of their life abroad.

ESN believes that the **system of funding should be re-evaluated**. According to the examples and feedback collected by ESN, the system is far from being fair. E.g. German students receive much lower support for mobility programmes than other European students despite the fact that Germany is a relatively rich country. ESN recommends that the local economic situation of the host country is taken into consideration, as well as the student's family income.

One of the financial problems is related to the fact that too often, students **receive the grants late**; in some of the cases, even more than 3 months after the mobility programme has started. This creates an uncomfortable situation for students (as a very large portion of the costs occur at the beginning of the stay). Moreover, late payments automatically disqualify students from economically weak families as they cannot afford to pay for the first expenses all on their own.

General opinion of international students is that **the amount of grant money is too small**. In some countries, international and exchange students are not even able to pay half of their rent from the Erasmus grant money. Governments and other stakeholders should be encouraged to invest in the mobility as they are indirect beneficiaries of the mobility of individuals.

Concerning the **full portability of grants**, Denmark and Sweden prove to be the role models as their students are allowed to receive funding also while being abroad.

In order to increase the seriousness and commitment of the international students, it might be a good practice to follow their study results and performance during their stay abroad. In case they fail all their exams and obviously do not take their stay abroad seriously, they should be requested to **repay the grant** which could

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be paid to another student.

1.6. Mobility to and from the European Union

ESN sees **several ways** to promote and increase the mobility to and from the European Union:

- The **application procedures** for these mobility programmes and respective grants should be **simplified** and all possible obstacles resulting in delays should be removed (such as necessity of visa and related fees etc.).
- There is a clear **lack of information on other than European programmes**. Students are mostly informed about mobility possibilities within the EU, or to the most popular countries (such as US or Australia), however, information on other countries and their exchange programmes is missing.
 - Best practices from ESN – involving international students from those “exotic” countries in study abroad fairs and information markets to expose these destinations and programmes to a broader public.
 - Additionally, a good way to introduce the country and programmes to foreign students is to organise summer universities / summer schools for a shorter period of time where students would have an opportunity to find out more about the possible hosting country and decide if they want to study there.
- There should be a **bigger financial support** for students interested in taking part in the mobility programmes outside the EU and to the students coming to study to Europe.
- Language could be an obstacle in certain countries where it is unavoidable to speak the local language. Language classes and training should be an obligatory part of each mobility programme.

1.7. Preparation of the mobility period and quality assurance issues

ESN believes that mobility needs to be of a quality, otherwise, those participating in mobility programme cannot benefit fully from their experience.

Successful preparation is a precondition for ensuring the quality of the study period abroad. Based on negative examples, HEIs should commit themselves to ensure high quality of courses to the incoming students:

- **No changes in the course schedules** offered should occur during the registration. If significant changes take place, the recognition upon return is endangered.
- Classes should **not be offered solely to international students**. Institutions should ensure integration and interaction among international and local students. Through cooperation in the classes and team work, both groups enhance their intercultural and communication skills and the whole local community profit.
- The professors or lecturers should have a **sufficient knowledge of English**, which leads to substantially lower quality of the teaching and learning. HEIs should consider opinions/feedback of the students in such situations.

Often, **international students are treated differently** than the regular local students of the HEI. Some professors do not expect much from the international students as they see the mobility period rather as an cultural and fun experience. This approach might be discouraging for the international and exchange students from studying hard and trying to gain as much as possible from the new academic environment. For others who are considering the mobility, this might be a decisive factor for not going as they fear low academic value for their studies.

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ESN invites HEIs and professors to treat the exchange students equally to the local students in order to ensure their proper integration to the local students' community and full academic experience.

1.8. Reaching out to Disadvantaged Groups

ESN believes that mobility opportunities should be **accessible and equal for all students**, regardless their social, economical or personal background. It is especially important that disadvantaged groups are provided a special assistance and support while becoming mobile.

ESN sees following difficulties among the biggest barriers by disadvantaged groups:

- Often, there are **strong social prejudices** among the general public towards the disadvantaged groups. It is extremely important that the disadvantaged students are guided and encouraged in order to participate in the mobility.
- **Lack of funding** is an obstacle to mobility in general, but even more so for the group of disadvantaged students. Students from economically weak background often have a very strong motivation to experience a mobility period. However, for their parents, it is impossible to support them abroad.
- **Accessibility of HEIs** for students with disabilities is limited (no barrier-free entrances and exits etc.). Also, often students from disabilities are discouraged by presenting them all the possible problems and obstacles connected to their mobility. Lack of information on the possibilities and accessible HEIs contributes to very small numbers of mobile students with disabilities.

In order to support and encourage the mobility of students with disabilities, ESN has launched a new project called **ExchangeAbility**.

- In short term, the project aims at involving local disabled student in the work of ESN section with the international students. In this way, both the student with disabilities and the section members benefit – the first experiences the internationalisation at home and will be encouraged to go study abroad, the latter will learn to deal with students with disabilities.
- In the long term, the ExchangeAbility aims at improving and enhancing the mobility of students with disabilities. Thanks to experience with local disabled student, the ESN sections will be able to receive and assist to international student with disabilities. On the other hand, the international student with disabilities will be more comfortable to leave as they will know that they will receive all the support necessary from both the ESN section and HEI.

2. THE STAY ABROAD AND FOLLOW-UP

2.1. Mentoring and Integration

Integration and mentoring belongs to the core of the work of the local sections of Erasmus Student Network. Facilitating the integration of incoming students in the local community was one of the original reasons for the establishment of ESN and throughout its existence, ESN has achieved a considerable level of expertise in this field.

Local ESN sections are mostly formed by local students (most of them being ex-exchange students themselves) who provide support and services to the international students coming to their HEI. The sections organise various activities and events throughout the whole semester in order to allow the international

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students to interact with their new environment and benefit from their exchange period to its utmost. The best practices and examples of ESN are listed below:

- **Buddy / tutor / mentor programme:** a local student volunteer helping one (or more) exchange student through the first few weeks of their stay in the new country. Generally, the buddy helps mainly with practical matters, but also with cultural and social integration. The buddy allows the international student to get to know their host culture and society easier and prevent or reduce a possible cultural shock.
 - ISN Bayreuth (Germany): the tutoring system assigns each international student to a tutor from his/her same field of study. Tutors are in charge of the academic mentoring of the international students.
- **An introduction/orientation week:** the aim is to facilitate the arrival and first days of incoming foreign students in a new country. The introduction / orientation weeks work the best if prepared and carried out in cooperation with the IRO. The programme should include both academic information and activities ensuring the integration among the students.
 - ESN Aarhus (Denmark): “Denmark Today” is a three week long orientation course for incoming international students at the University of Aarhus. The programme introduces the life in Denmark, Danish language and culture, while meeting and integrating with their fellow students before engaging in their studies. Some other popular activities are the Danish cooking classes and BBQ nights, games in the park or trips.
- **Tandem/language training:** see above (1.3: language and culture).
 - ESN Genova (Italy): the Tandem project is a free language exchange programme between an exchange student and a student of the University of Genova. This teaching method aims to improve knowledge of foreign languages, and to create opportunities for encounters and cultural exchanges between Italian and international students in Genova.
- **Regular cultural events:** as the cultural exchange is one of the crucial aspects of the study abroad period, many events are organised for both local and international students to learn about each other’s cultures, traditions and backgrounds (e.g. country presentations, with the most typical traditions and eradication of the stereotypes, dance performances, debates on the latest European topics or screening of movies).
- **Reintegration of homecoming students:** ESN sections also take care of local students coming home after their study abroad period when many of them might feel the lack of international environment and might be experiencing re-entry cultural shock. They are thus invited to volunteer in a local ESN section where they can get again involved in an international community and develop their international identity. It also teaches young people active participation and they thus become true European citizens.

Biggest obstacles concerning the integration of the international and local students are connected to the fact that students have hardly opportunity to interact. Many international students are provided accommodation by the HEI and are housed together with other International students, with minimal contact with the local students. Similarly, many classes at HEIs are only designed for the international students; local students have hardly any chance to enrol these course. This leads to further separation of the students.

ESN recommends that HEIs ensure **mixed accommodation and the classes** during the mobility for the international students in order to allow for a better integration. Additionally, students from the same nationality should not be housed at the same place.

As for classes, courses at the HEI should be **for local and international students together**. The school

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environment with lot of team work and projects provides space for the students to mingle and get to know each other. Obviously, a support from the professor or teacher is necessary; otherwise, the class may remain divided into two groups (international and local students separated).

2.2. Recognition and Validation

Formal education

ESN has recently published a **final report of the PRIME research**, looking into the problems of recognition and possible solutions or recommendations for improvements. The whole report is available for downloading here: <http://www.esn.org/prime/primedoc.pdf>.

The PRIME research among 100 higher education institutions from 24 countries and nearly 2400 former exchange students from 52 countries revealed following facts concerning the process of recognition:

- Information prior to the exchange is mostly provided by the International Relation Offices and Faculty Coordinators, followed by local branches of ESN. Personal ways of informing students are the most effective (such as meetings, seminars or sessions about studies abroad).
- Almost all of the interviewed institutions provide a learning agreement for Erasmus students prior to leaving (usually between 2 to 4 months before).
- Only 2/3 of the Erasmus students – with a valid Learning Agreement signed prior to their stay abroad – had their courses fully recognized afterwards. Almost 30% received partial recognition leaving a minority of about 4% with no recognition at all. However, according to PRIME higher education institutions, an average of 3/4 of their outgoing students is expected to get full recognition.
- There is a lack of proper and concrete definitions, including the definition of (*full academic*) *recognition* itself, which has been recognized as one of the obstacles. Such a definition would decrease a risk of misunderstanding and also the possibility of HEIs to include their own rules.
- Five main obstacles were identified during the research:
 - Individual problems of students (such as unfinished courses)
 - Incompatibility of study programmes
 - Problems with the calculation of course credits
 - Organizational issues
 - Problems to recognize certain courses
- Some evidence was found that course recognition is related to the home institution of students, as well as to whether parties responsible for the recognition are identical to those signing the Learning Agreement.

Based on the finding, ESN recommends to the European Commission as well as to other actors in the higher education following suggestions to reduce obstacles and improve the quality and accessibility of student mobility in higher education:

- HEIs should **recognize competencies rather than equal course names** and descriptions. Moreover, institutions are encouraged to build more flexible programmes and allow students to take courses that differ from their curriculum when they go abroad.
- **Clear guidelines** should be provided on the practicalities of prolonging studies abroad in order to prevent ambiguous situations when students prolong their exchange or do a year-long exchange.
- HEIs should make sure **parties signing the Learning agreements** are in the **authority of recognizing the courses** after exchange. There should also be specific guidelines concerning the actual recognition process and how to implement successful course recognition systems in HEIs.

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- HEIs using national credit systems should **explain their credit transfer system** to the outgoing students in time. ECTS credits only should be used and conversions from one system to another should be avoided.
- Sending institutions should **explain their course recognition procedures** to the outgoing students in advance. Students need to be aware of which courses can and which cannot be recognized.
- Host institutions and faculties should **provide all information in time**, including course schedules and descriptions for prospective exchange students. They should guarantee student enrolment in all courses, sign Learning Agreements and send transcripts with grades in a due time.

One of the solutions to encourage HEIs to recognise properly conducted mobility period could be including **mobility** (and recognition procedures) **in the system of university ranking**.

Non Formal Education

Additionally, ESN sees mobility in a broader perspective as a valuable experience resulting in new skills and competencies, regardless if such an experience occurred through formal or non-formal structures. ESN has witnessed that the value of mobility happening within the non-formal education structures is often underestimated by formal education providers, by the society, as well as by the learners themselves.

ESN, being one of the providers of the non-formal education both for the international students and ESN members, believes that the non-formal learning brings benefits not only to the person involved, but consequently to the whole community.

Some of the higher education institutions started to recognise competencies students gain during their mobility period. E.g. several Italian universities award approximately 5 ECTS to students that participate in international exchange programmes, additionally to the ECTS received for courses studied at the host HEI.

In the case of volunteer work of ESN sections, it is also the HEIs, local students and professors who profit. Thanks to ESN sections, the internationalisation at home is more feasible and accessible also for those who are not able to take part in traditional mobility schemes. Some higher education institutions award and recognize also competences gained by internationalization at home:

- Some HEIs where ESN sections are based recognize the work of ESN members and award their work by **ECTS** (for elective courses – such as ESN FH Campus Wien (AU), ISN St. Pölten (AU), ISN-Braunschweig (DE), ESN-TUMi München (DE), ESN Veszprem (HU), ESN Utrecht (NL), ISN Eindhoven (NL), ISN Leiden (NL), ESN Twente (NL), ESN Trondheim (NO), ESN CIRC (SE), ESN Kent (UK)).
- In other cases, the active involvement in ESN is seen as an **additional bonus for students applying for studies abroad** (e.g. University of Economics in Prague for the members and buddies of the ESN VSE Prague – Buddy System).

Based on the positive experience, ESN recommends that more **non-formal educational methods** are applied in the formal education, especially with focus on the mobility:

- ESN Poland organizes a project called **Social Erasmus**. Within the project, Erasmus students get more involved and enrich the local society. E.g. the Erasmus students, together with the local section visit orphanage houses, kindergartens or schools to present the children and pupils benefits of the mobility in an interactive way (sharing their cultural habits and traditions, teaching basics of the language etc.).

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- ESN Italy organizes a project called **Erasmus Village** – a group of international students move for a week to a small village to experience the daily life of the community. At the same time, the international students bring a completely new international atmosphere to the village and make the inhabitants acquainted with different cultures.

Recognition in terms of the non-formal learning in mobility should moreover not only be assessed based on a particular set of gained competences – mobility is a process in long term leading to development of European citizenship, cooperation between nations and another understanding of integration.

3. A NEW PARTNERSHIP FOR MOBILITY

3.1. Mobilising actors and resources

It is crucial for facilitating the access to the mobility to a wider public that more actors are involved. HEIs and national states cannot count only on the European financial sources, but must be ready to contribute themselves.

ESN suggests that national and / or institutional budgets are earmarked for international mobility. In this way, international mobility would become a natural expenditure for a HEI / national state. In ESN's point of view, the investments in mobility are key as mobile young people are very likely to become the next leaders and use their international experience for the benefits of the whole community / society.

Thus, the national governments should also promote supporting international mobility among other national actors (institutions, organizations, private companies etc.). The promotion should include especially the provision of information to these actors, as well as presenting the benefits of the mobility.

Regarding examples and ideas of the funding of youth mobility, local sections of ESN have successfully used the already existing **twin partnerships between cities** to finance several short-term youth exchanges:

- Sections from Brno (CZ) and Utrecht (NL) have visited each other in order to exchange experience, know-how and knowledge, including a meeting with the city representatives and a discussion on topics of mobility in general, and mobility of HEI students in particular
- Sections from Plzen (CZ) and Winterthur (CH) have launched a similar cooperation – exchange meetings with both ESN members and local representatives.

The twin cooperation allows the youth from both cities / countries to travel to each other's cities / countries, meet and exchange information not only with each other, but also with the city representatives (those responsible for the education and culture). Additionally, during the reciprocal visits, the participants have a very good opportunity to get to know each others' countries, cultures and traditions.

ESN would also recommend that non-profit organizations are allowed and encouraged to participate in the Erasmus placement programme and to host interns. This would both increase the available places for university students who are interested to carry out an internship / placement in a foreign country, as well as promote the non-profit sector to students and young people.

Based on the experience of the local sections, ESN has noticed that many national governments do not follow their promises of support to the student mobility. Their actions are rather contradictory and not at all supportive towards the student mobility.

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For example, **in Finland**, there has been a lot of pressure to graduate as soon as possible (in comparison to previously unlimited time to study). In order to avoid delaying the graduation, many students choose not to “waste” time by going on exchange (especially given the high probability of problems with recognition). Even though the Finnish government has compiled and approved an internationalisation strategy (stating that the numbers of incoming and outgoing students should be substantially increased), their actions do not follow the announced strategy.

3.2. More active involvement from the business world

It is crucial that businesses start to support and invest in the mobility of young people. ESN would recommend that governments consider incentive systems for businesses to give grants to exchange and international students. One of the examples could be Coca Cola in Serbia offering grants to students.

3.3. Virtual Networking and eTwinning

Virtual networking could be a powerful means to support the mobility of young people – especially in the preparatory phase of mobility. However, ESN would like to point out that the virtual networking cannot replace the actual mobility and should not be seen as the way to increase the numbers of mobile young people.

ESN has been successfully using the ICT tools in order to bridge the geographical distance between the local sections and international students the sections take care of.

ESN Galaxy is a web platform based on the new Web 2.0 technologies. The system is built up around one central website (galaxy.esn.org), to which news and information from websites of local sections are fetched to and displayed on (provided that the sections use a website template Satellite offered to all the sections from ESN as a part of their membership benefits).

The Galaxy system brings together all the ESN sections, allowing them to communicate and share information in real time. In this way, international students and ESN members can immediately have an overview of what is going on in the network.

Similarly, ESN local sections take advantage of the social networks that are already in use and which majority of young people use (such as Facebook). Most of ESN sections have created their profile / group on Facebook in order to get in touch with the incoming students, invite them for the activities that have been organized for them etc. It also enables the international students who are to spend a semester together to get in touch with each other before coming and start establishing preliminary connections.

ESN believes that using the social networks is important to reach young people, to persuade them about benefits of mobility and encourage them to go abroad. Alternatively, the social networks could also serve as “a laboratory” for young people to experience the mobility before actually leaving abroad.

3.4. Engaging the "multipliers"

ESN sees the **additional multipliers** as extremely important for the mobility of young people. Young people are often prone to follow the behavior of role models – and teachers, trainers or peer students are more likely to play such a role than parents or PR materials.

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International students and ESN members already serve as multipliers – as they often encourage their friends and family members to be mobile, by showing the positive examples and experience with mobility.

However, the teachers, trainers and other possible multipliers need to **receive proper support** – both financial and moral, especially from the side of HEI. Often, we could see that the HEI does not value enough “international” activities of their staff.

A special system of incentives should be introduced for teachers, trainers of youth workers (e.g. possibility of using the sabbatical year for mobility, special mobility grants etc.).

3.5. Mobility Targets

Targets, indicators of progress, benchmarking etc. create peer pressure (peers being governments, institutions, etc.) and can easily turn into stimuli for arms race among peers (cf. Bologna Process Stocktaking Exercise).

Once this occurs, mobility targets tend to emphasize quantitative aspects of improvement (e.g. more students abroad) at the cost of qualitative aspects (e.g. higher quality of a mobility experience). ESN would like to point out that both aspects need to be taken into consideration in order to secure that the mobility is not perceived only in terms of numbers.

Additionally, the targets and indicators must be precisely defined and measurable if they are to fulfil their role.

Conclusions and follow-up

Erasmus Student Network, being one of the main actors involved in the work with international students, and promoting and supporting the exchange in the higher education, focused in its reaction to the Green Paper mainly on the countless good examples and practices in the network.

All the sections and ESN members are working towards better mobility of students in Europe and beyond. ESN believes that despite great developments in the area of higher educational mobility, there is still a lot to be done. It is necessary that all the stakeholders accept their responsibility and act accordingly in order to provide a mobility opportunity to all young people.

ESN is looking forward to the continuation of the discussion and debate on the mobility of young people, and university students in particular. ESN appreciates that the young people who are at the same time beneficiaries of the mobility were invited to the discussion and recommends that they are involved in the further steps of shaping the mobility in the future.

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