

More Erasmus for more people, but not enough investment

Reaction of the Erasmus Student Network to the new Erasmus+ Programme

On the 30th of May 2018, the European Commission presented its proposal¹ for the Erasmus+ Successor Programme, running from 2021 to 2027. This document serves as a basis for the work of the European Parliament, European Council, and all civil society organisations involved in the field. Other documents, such as Annual Work Plans or Programme Guides, will complement the information provided by the European Commission, all leading to the final adoption of the programme, expected to happen in 2019. In this reaction, ESN presents its views to the proposal put forward by the European Commission with a special focus on the higher education chapter of Erasmus+.

ESN has contributed to the discussion on the Erasmus+ successor programme through its #ErasmusUpgrade Manifesto². The document is based on an online consultation that reached more than 1000 students directly, and from a series of face-to-face dialogues involving students and volunteers from across ESN's 40 member countries. The preliminary results of the consultation were presented to the European Commission during a preparatory meeting in August 2017 and publicly discussed during the #ErasmusUpgrade Training and Conference in Brussels in October 2017. This event was attended by representatives from 25 European countries, both EU and non-EU member states, who analysed the results of the consultation and discussed them with decision-makers involved in the revision of the Erasmus+ programme. These participants produced a series of 13 recommendations which are the base for our comments to the programme proposed by the European Commission.

Outreach

ESN is glad to see that the European Commission presented a bold proposal which ends tackling many of ESN's concerns. ESN strongly shares the vision of the European Commission that the future Programme should **improve its reach to people from diverse cultural, social and economic backgrounds** and different ages. It is also good to see that a particular focus has been given to "people with disabilities and migrants as well as Union citizens living in remote areas". (p. 2)

"High quality learning mobility for people from diverse backgrounds" is listed as the first of the indicators on Quality Mobility in the Annex. ESN is hopeful that this reflects the importance the authors give to this aspect and stands ready to work together with the European Commission and other stakeholders in order to reach this ambitious goal. We agree with the need that for all types of mobility activities, the level of grant support should be optimised, including by ensuring higher grants for certain categories of students and learners, including in higher education mobility (p. 2).

¹ For more information visit https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:147de752-63eb-11e8-ab9c-01aa75ed71a1.0003.03/DOC_1&format=PDF.

² For more information visit esn.org/manifesto.

The proposal mentions that the **International actions** with third countries or partner countries of the programme are in need of a significant simplification (p. 9, p. 13). We welcome this conclusion as according to our experience there is an increased interest from students in partner countries to study and train in Europe and vice-versa. Easier access and sufficient administrative, financial, and social support for said students is needed in order to ensure a place for European education in the global education field. Hence, ESN welcomes the European Commission's decision to intensify the cooperation in education with non-EU member-states as it can greatly benefit students and staff across the world, further strengthening the EU's position as a global actor, and the promotion of intercultural understanding and peace worldwide.

ESN understands that the **Brexit negotiations** are a complicated process and therefore accepts the references made to it throughout the proposal. However, the Erasmus Programme has benefited thousands of students from the UK to study in Europe and vice-versa. We believe that the loss of this cooperation between the EU and the UK can have very negative consequences to all citizens, further deepening the argumentation behind Brexit. ESN urges all involved parties to find a solution to keep the UK within the Programme, using the same approach adopted for today's non-EU Programme Countries (Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, FYROM and Turkey). The solution must be found as soon as possible, since the current uncertainty is already damaging a generation of UK and continental Europeans alike. ESN International has published a reaction paper³ together with ESN UK, where more information about ESN's position on Brexit can be found.

Management and Implementation

ESN supports the idea to keep the same structure as the previous Programme. The introduction of the three key actions and three chapters (p. 19) took some time for the field to implement efficiently, but these are currently well-established. Building onto the currently successful structure and implementing adjustments is preferred over making drastic changes to the structure. Making drastic changes could cause unnecessary stress and confusion, which could lead to a decrease in the successful implementation of the programme.

ESN supports “**simplifying access to the Programme** to the widest possible range of target groups (e.g., simpler rules and administrative procedures, and optimised online tools) while ensuring a competitive and transparent selection of projects, a correct grant-management cycle with minimised financial risks for the Union” (p. 4). The processes of administering the exchanges for students and staff are often very time-consuming and ESN supports actions that contribute to overcome this. Tools such as the Online Learning Agreement⁴ and the Erasmus+ App⁵, which ESN has been developing together with other stakeholders in the field, are good examples of tools for this purpose.

Hence, ESN welcomes the bigger relevance given to **tools for virtual cooperation**. Indeed, these tools can greatly increase transnational cooperation and dialogue, particularly in contexts of virtual exchanges and virtual mobility. Virtual tools can also help preparing future participants and help them maximise their experience through a guided and mentored follow-

³ For more information visit esn.org/reaction-to-UK-withdrawal-from-EU.

⁴ See <https://www.learning-agreement.eu/>.

⁵ See <https://erasmusapp.eu/>.

up of their mobility experience. These can be even more relevant for groups that for many reasons find more obstacles in physical mobility, such as family-carers or people with disabilities. However, ESN stresses that virtual tools are complementary to the physical experience and cannot replace it. Human contact is essential for increased results of international mobility and, therefore, investment in quality physical mobility must continuously grow and stay on top of the priority list. Hence, options like blended mobility, which is also highlighted in this proposal, are a great way of combining the best of both worlds.

Furthermore, ESN supports the use of **simplified grants** in the form of lump-sums, unit-costs and flat-rate funding (p. 24) rather than other complicated and time-consuming grant rules that are in place today. We are glad to see that the European Commission shares this vision.

The clarification on the **types of partnerships** – for cooperation, for excellence, and for innovation – is a very interesting step to foster the dialogue between organisations with different types of expertise. In this regard, we remain concerned about the sustainability of the outcomes of these partnerships and urge the European Commission to evaluate carefully each of the proposed projects, also when they finish, by providing the space for their continuous development. In that sense, a “partnership of partnerships” might be a good solution since the three proposed models can correspond to different stages of the development of a new service or programme.

In this sense, ESN welcomes the possibility for **small-scale partnerships** that aim at making the programme more accessible for newcomers and smaller organisations. With the proper training, these organisations can increase the number of beneficiaries of the programme and the local applicability of Erasmus+ projects, contributing to solve some of the issues identified by the recent mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ Programme. This has been one of the main claims of most organisations in the field and as in the past, ESN remains available to contribute to shaping the action and future calls.

The action focused on the creation of **European Universities** (p. 20) is ambitious yet needed. ESN does believe that exchange should be an option embedded in every single course, leaving it up to the student to choose the possibility of going abroad. However, it is important to stress that this initiative must not become another source for universities to fund their research projects. Research is undoubtedly a very important sector that creates jobs and growth, but it should be funded by other tools and programmes more focused in this specific sector. Hence, ESN believes that European Universities can serve as catalysts of student and staff mobility in their regions, incentivising other universities to diversify their exchange opportunities and intensifying the internationalisation in higher education institutions. As students will be enrolled in all universities of the consortium, decreasing the potential bureaucratic hassle or other problems (such as accommodation or student support services for incoming students) should be a priority.

When it comes to the **DiscoverEU** initiative, while we understand its purpose and the fact that it is still in a test phase, we believe that there are still too many questions that must be answered before any implementation. Even though the train ticket (or other alternative covered by the programme) is free to all, the sustainability of this individual travel remains a central issue. As it is now, without any kind of financial support or mentoring to maximise the experience of the participants, the DiscoverEU initiative will remain rather elitist and limited to certain geographical areas. We urge the European Commission to clarify these and other questions raised by several civil society organisations and MEP before a full implementation of the initiative.

Still in the youth field, ESN regrets to not see better recognised the importance of international non-governmental youth organisations in the **Structured Dialogue** process. While National Working Groups are certainly central for an efficient implementation of the process, it must be acknowledged that participation does not end in national structures and that European-wide organisations bring other types of young people to the debate. In practice, territorial coverage does not equal a full coverage of all young people as different types of organisations have different tools and methods in place. We recommend the European institutions to evaluate the role of international organisations in the participation of young people in political life and to provide a proper space for their involvement in Structured Dialogue.

On this note, ESN welcomes the strong will to cooperate with **EU-wide networks** through the creation of an action targeting them. ESN and others have proudly cooperated with the European institutions over many years, providing them with feedback collected directly from the grassroots level. This work can hardly be done by any other type of organisation and must be acknowledge by Erasmus+.

ESN is happy to read that “while undertaking their mobility period abroad, participants will be encouraged to actively participate in the local community in the host country” (p. 3 of the accompanying staff working document⁶). **Volunteering while abroad** is a practice that has been facilitated by ESN for about ten years through our SocialErasmus programme⁷, and in particular through activities like Erasmus in Schools⁸. Other organisations have their own programmes, all contributing for a much bigger impact of the Erasmus+ programme in local communities. Under ESN’s coordination, these organisations have recently hosted the debate on the topic at the European Parliament and several MEP have supported a pilot project that has been submitted for a trial already in 2019.

However, and as stated in our paper “Fostering active citizenship through Erasmus+ student mobility”⁹, this initiative requires some preparatory steps to make it possible. Firstly, information about volunteering opportunities must reach the participants of the programme and this can be done either by their host institution or local civil society organisations. Secondly, a recognition and validation system must be put in place. Thirdly, because there is a gap between the capacity of many civil society organisations to cope with a potential increase in demand from mobile students, investment in building the capacity of local civil society organisations is essential. Finally, HEI should be encouraged to fully engage in active citizenship initiatives, making the topic a priority in Erasmus+ student mobility and beyond.

⁶ COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT - Main actions implementing the Erasmus Programme Accompanying the document “Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing 'Erasmus': the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) 1288/2013”. For more information visit <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018SC0276&from=EN>.

⁷ For more information visit socialerasmus.esn.org.

⁸ For more information visit socialerasmus.esn.org/?q=activity/erasmus-schools.

⁹ For more information visit esn.org/sites/default/files/pages/fostering_active_citizenship_through_erasmus_student_mobility.pdf.

Increased budget for more Quality, Outreach and Transparency

The European Commission has set out the goal to send out three times the amount of students with a budget that is doubled. As mentioned in the #ErasmusUpgrade Manifesto (recommendations 11-13), ESN believes in an increased budget that ensures an increase in **quality mobility** before, during, and after mobility, and through more funding per participant and through a reinforced ECHE. ESN is therefore supportive of the increase in budget, but would like to urge that the increased quantity of participants should be reached through upscaling activities that ensure a similar, and preferably even increased, level of quality.

ESN appreciates the recommendation for an **increase of national support to student mobility**. As said in the proposal, “Member States should endeavour to adopt all appropriate measures to remove legal and administrative obstacles to the proper functioning of the Programme. This includes resolving, where possible, and without prejudice to Union law on the entry and residence of third-country nationals issues that create difficulties in obtaining visas and residence permits” (p. 23). ESN worked on the topic of visa simplification for students in 2012 and our recommendations¹⁰ from then are still valid. Visas are still an obstacle for students and volunteers going abroad abroad, thus facilitating visa procedures for young people should be a priority. As the programme wishes to reinforce its international dimension, the discussion on visas must be reopened and led to a simplification of the procedure for students from outside of the Schengen Area.

Conclusion: a strong base for a thorough negotiation

This proposal shows a clear effort of the European Commission to meet the expectations of several actors involved in the many fields of the Erasmus+ Programme. While in this reaction we have focused mostly on the higher education and youth fields, a lot more could have been said about Vocational Education and Training and the strengthening of ErasmusPro, or about the new opportunities for Sports, School Education, or Adult Education. We welcome the investment in these fields as they can contribute to better informed and healthy Europeans, in the context of Lifelong Learning.

ESN can see many recommendations provided to the European Commission throughout 2017, the year of listening, reflected in this proposal. Overall, ESN is glad to see the Commission’s decision for a strengthened programme, which follows the most ambitious option given by the Impact Assessment. As said in this study, we hope that more investment will indeed translate into more participants and more projects, all with a higher level of quality.

However, there are certainly aspects to be improved and over the next months ESN is available to discuss each of them to support the European institutions in creating the programme that best serves the interest of all future participants and European society in general.

¹⁰ For more information visit esn.org/sites/default/files/pages/ESN%20Position%20on%20Visas_0.pdf.

As we move to the second stage on the negotiations for the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027, we urge the European Parliament and the Member States to push for an increased Erasmus+ budget. As explained by the Erasmusx10 campaign¹¹, Erasmus+ has a direct impact in local youth, increasing their inclusion in the 21st century and strengthening Europe's social fabric. A stronger Programme also feeds the belief in democracy as a system and in European values in general. Finally, together with the Bologna Process, Erasmus+ has already brought the multitude of European education systems closer to each other, leading a more skilled population which, in turn, contributes to the growth of every single European country, region, and town.

About the Erasmus Student Network

Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is the biggest student association in Europe. Present at over 1000 Higher Education Institutions, it unites over 530 local associations in 40 countries. More than 13 000 volunteers take care of over 350 000 international students under the motto "Students helping students". 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.

¹¹ For more information visit www.erasmusx10.eu.