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European Policy Proposal:

**Expanding Participation in
Erasmus+**



Erasmus+

Summary

The Erasmus student mobility programme provides a unique and valuable opportunity for European youth. Participation in Erasmus is associated with outcomes like reduced youth unemployment, improved foreign language proficiency, increased intercultural understanding, and higher rates of European identification. Unfortunately, participation in Erasmus is disproportionately low among students with lower socio-economic status and less family education. This proposal suggests measures that can be implemented to improve the accessibility of the Erasmus programme, so that its benefits can reach as many young people as possible.

Introduction: the Erasmus Student Mobility Program

The Erasmus Student Mobility programme, a flagship feature of the larger Erasmus+ programme, offers students from 33 European countries the opportunity to study or take on traineeships in another European country. Since its establishment by the European Commission in 1987, 3.3 million students have participated in exchanges, and participation rises steadily each year.¹

The vast majority of students receive financial support through a monthly grant to help cover their living expenses over the course of the exchange. For many students, without such a grant, undergoing an exchange abroad would not be possible. The size of the grant, which is determined by national agencies and higher education institutions, varies according to the anticipated cost of living in the host country. In the 2013-2014 year, the average monthly grant was €274.²

The EU envisioned Erasmus as a means to strengthen intra-European free movement, tackle youth unemployment, and promote a common European identity based on shared values. An investment in youth was considered an investment in Europe. The EU's continued belief in these aims is reflected in its commitment to expand the programme: it has allocated €16.4 billion in funding for the 2014-2020 period, an increase of 40% over the previous period, in the hopes that 20% of European youth will be mobile by 2020³. The benefits of student mobility are vast, and increased funding for Erasmus programme is an encouraging development for both European youth and the future of the continent as a whole.

Benefits of the Erasmus Programme

Participating in an Erasmus exchange provides numerous benefits for students, and rising participation rates serve as proof that European youth are in recognition of this. The popularity of Erasmus has grown

¹ European Commission, 'Erasmus – Facts, Figures & Trends', http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/statistics/erasmus-plus-facts-figures_en.pdf, 2015.

² Ibid.

³ European Commission, "Erasmus+ Annual Report 2016", https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus2/files/annual_report_2016.pdf, 2017.



dramatically: in the 2013-2014 academic year, over 270,000 students took part in an Erasmus exchange, double the number of students from just a decade before.⁴

The benefits of the Erasmus Programme can be divided into five main categories:

Employability

Youth unemployment remains a persistent problem in Europe; in a third of EU member states, the youth unemployment rate exceeds 20%⁵. The European Commission found that the unemployment rate for Erasmus students is 23% lower, five years after graduation, than that for graduates that did not participate in the program.⁶ This result can be linked to professional attributes gained through the exchange, including technical skills, language proficiency, the establishment of professional networks, and increased self-confidence. In one study on Romanian participants, 78.6% of students who had completed an exchange reported a major positive impact on their professional knowledge and skills.⁷

Foreign Language Acquisition

The immersive quality of Erasmus exchanges allows students to gain proficiency or fluency in a foreign language. Erasmus participants consistently report that their exchange had a significant, positive influence on their foreign language skills⁸. Associated benefits include increased motivation to continue learning a foreign language, increased confidence in using that language, and subsequently increased confidence in their ability to move abroad again in future.⁹

Intercultural Understanding and Co-operation

The ability of Erasmus to foster intra-European integration was a celebrated priority from the outset. At the time of Erasmus' creation, European Commission President Jacques Delors spoke of the obligation to promote, through the programme, "understanding and mutual respect between peoples and cultural and linguistic groups".¹⁰

In a survey of Erasmus participants from 30 countries, 92% of students reported that their exchange altered their understanding of people from different cultural backgrounds¹¹. Extended stays abroad encourage the fostering of cross-cultural relationships and the promotion of cooperation, tolerance, and

⁴ European Commission, 'Erasmus – Facts, Figures & Trends',

http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/statistics/erasmus-plus-facts-figures_en.pdf, 2015.

⁵ 'Youth unemployment rate in EU member states as of August 2017', Statista, <http://libraryguides.vu.edu.au/oxford-referencing/internet-websites> (accessed 25 January 2018).

⁶ European Commission, 'The Erasmus Impact Study: Effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalisation of higher education institutions', http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/study/2014/erasmus-impact_en.pdf, 2014.

⁷ L. Dolga, et al., 'Erasmus Mobility Impact on Professional Training and Personal Development of Students Beneficiaries', *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 191, 2015, p. 1006-1013.

⁸ M. Otero, 'The Socio-Economic Background of Erasmus Students: A Trend Towards Wider Inclusion?', *International Review of Education*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2008, p. 135-154.

⁹ E. Llurda et al., 'Erasmus student mobility and the construction of European citizenship', *The Language Learning Journal*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2016, p. 323-346.

¹⁰ C. Versini, 'Erasmus: Renewing the Original Ambitions', *Notre Europe: Jacques Delors Institute*, 4 December 2017,

<http://www.institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/erasmusrenewingtheoriginalambitions-versini-tribune-dec17.pdf>

¹¹ M. Otero, 'The Socio-Economic Background of Erasmus Students: A Trend Towards Wider Inclusion?', *International Review of Education*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2008, p. 135-154.



non-discrimination. Predictably, the exchange is associated with improved ability in coping with cultural differences and increased likelihood of having transnational relationships.^{12,13}

Fostering a European Identity

A key objective of the Erasmus Programme was to strengthen feelings of common European identity and citizenship, to create a “People’s Europe” that transcends national ties.¹⁴ In some countries, much work remains to be done in this regard: in the United Kingdom, only half of those 18-30 years old see themselves as possessing a European identity¹⁵. Although findings vary by country, several studies have found that Erasmus students report a greater identification with Europe after undergoing exchanges, with longer stays abroad associated with greater increases in European self-identification^{16,17}.

Personal Growth and Satisfaction

Finally, the Erasmus programme has consistently received high scores on measures of student satisfaction¹⁸. Going through the “Erasmus experience” – living abroad, creating new friendships, developing greater independence, and improving language facility – is a unique opportunity that is valued by youth across Europe.

Accessibility Concerns

Intra-European mobility has the potential to stimulate both socio-economic and cultural integration, and the Erasmus Programme is rightly heralded for its significant achievements in this area. However, the success of Erasmus is mitigated by the fact that the numerous benefits it provides are not accessible to each and every young person interested in the opportunity.

Erasmus students tend to come from privileged backgrounds: compared to the general public, they are more likely to report that their parents work in high-level occupations, have average or above-average incomes, and have high levels of education^{19,20}. Despite the fact that this trend was identified long ago, there has been little improvement in this regard over time.

¹² R. Martinez et al., The Impact of an Erasmus Placement in Students’ Perception of their Intercultural Communicative Competence. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2016, p. 338-354.

¹³ European Commission, ‘The Erasmus Impact Study: Effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalisation of higher education institutions’, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/study/2014/erasmus-impact_en.pdf, 2014.

¹⁴ 87/227/EEC: Council Decision of 15 June 1987 adopting the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (Erasmus)

¹⁵ L. O’Carroll & C. Barr, ‘Half of young adults in the UK do not feel European, poll reveals. *The Guardian*, 11 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/apr/11/half-of-young-adults-in-the-uk-do-not-feel-european-demos-survey>

¹⁶ K. Mitchell, ‘Rethinking the ‘Erasmus Effect’ on European Identity’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 2, no. 53, 2015, p. 330-348.

¹⁷ V. Jacobone & G. Moro, ‘Evaluating the impact of the Erasmus programme: skills and European identity’, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2014, p. 209-328

¹⁸ European Commission, “Erasmus+ Annual Report 2016”, https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus2/files/annual_report_2016.pdf, 2017.

¹⁹ M. Otero, ‘The Socio-Economic Background of Erasmus Students: A Trend Towards Wider Inclusion?’, *International Review of Education*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2008, p. 135-154.

²⁰ M. Ballatore & M. Ferede, ‘The Erasmus Programme in France, Italy and the United Kingdom: student mobility as a signal of distinction and privilege.’ *European Educational Research Journal*, vol. 12, no.4, 2013.

Disproportionately low participation rates among students of lower socio-economic status is directly related to the matter of insufficient funding. Low Erasmus grant amounts are the most commonly cited reason for non-participation in an Erasmus exchange²¹. Total rates of student mobility remain well below the 20% target set by the European Commission and financial constraints offer a convincing explanation why. In a study commissioned by the European Parliament, 57% of students surveyed reported that studying abroad was too expensive for them to consider, and 29% rejected the opportunity after considering it because the grant they were offered was insufficient.²² The same study estimates that financial constraints prevent between 1 and 1.5 million students from studying abroad.

While participation in Erasmus can come with long-term financial benefits, initial costs can be high: students are often faced with fees associated with travel costs, insurance, and currency exchange. When grant amounts are insufficient to cover all the costs of living abroad, students are forced to draw on their personal funds. Indeed, a Eurobarometer survey found that 63% of those students who could afford to go abroad had to rely on private funding or savings to do so.²³ Youth who do not have personal or family financial resources to draw from may thus find participation impossible.

Students who live at home while studying, for either financial or cultural reasons, may be especially disadvantaged by problems of insufficient funding²⁴. This group often have lower monthly living costs, and the cost of living abroad independently may be a marked increase from their usual living expenses. Groups who have special needs, such as those with disabilities, may also face additional financial costs. Thus, for these groups, funding represents a particularly large barrier to participation.

The Case for Improving Access

It is critical that Erasmus, as a programme intended to foster inclusion and community, is accessible to all youth in Europe. In the EU Regulation establishing Erasmus+, it is written that actors shall “ensure that particular efforts are made to promote social inclusion and the participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities”.²⁵ The de facto exclusion of students who do not have the financial resources necessary to take part in an exchange undermines the inclusive objectives of the Erasmus Programme and deprives deserving students of an opportunity to gain invaluable skills.

²¹ M. Souto-Otero et al., ‘Barriers to International Student Mobility: Evidence from the Erasmus program’, *Educational Researcher* vol. 42, no. 2, 2013, p. 70-77.

²² H. Vossensteyn et al., ‘Improving the Participation in the Erasmus Programme – Study’ European Parliament, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/cult/dv/esstudyerasmus/esstudyerasmusen.pdf, 2010.

²³ European Commission, ‘Half of young Europeans ready to work abroad’, 13 May 2011, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-11-567_en.htm?locale=fr

²⁴ D. Cairns, ‘The Erasmus undergraduate exchange programme: a highly qualified success story?’, *Children’s Geographies*, vol. 15, no. 6, 2017, p. 728-740.

²⁵ Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing ‘Erasmus+’



QUICK FACTS

Average exchange duration: 6 months

Average monthly grant: €274

Average age of students: 23

Moreover, there is strong evidence to suggest that the benefits of the Erasmus Programme are particularly enhanced for those who are currently largely excluded from participation. One study found that the least socioeconomically advantaged students – those who are recipients of government financial assistance and report low parental education – have the *highest* returns from participation in study abroad programs.²⁶

This effect can also be seen with regard to European identity: one study has shown that “low-educated” individuals are much more likely to adopt a European identity after experiencing transnational practices like the Erasmus exchange than their high-educated peers.²⁷ This is because the latter group – who make up the majority of Erasmus participants – are already pre-disposed to self-identify as European. Consequently, they experience only minor gains in feeling *more* European. If the EU would like to strengthen the European community, the greatest gains can be made with those individuals that already feel excluded from European initiatives.

Solutions

While the EU has increased funding to the Erasmus programme, much of the focus has been on increasing the number of grants available, rather than the size of the grant²⁸. As such, the programme continues to exclude students who cannot afford to undertake an exchange with current average grant rates. Instead, measures to make **larger grants available to socio-economically disadvantaged students** can bring down the significant number of youth who must either turn down an exchange opportunity or do not feel they can even consider it in the first place.

Some countries have made progress on improving accessibility to Erasmus, providing extra grant amounts to students whose annual household income fall below a set threshold. In the United Kingdom, students whose household income is £25,000 or less can receive an additional €120 per month.²⁹ Similar policies exist in Italy and Spain. However, the availability of additional financing varies significantly by country and is often dependent on donations from private stakeholders, which is unstable and subject to significant year-to-year variability. To reduce uncertainty for students, a set proportion of funds from the Erasmus+ budget can be set out specifically for grant top-ups for disadvantaged students. Ideally,

²⁶ M. Parey & F. Waldinger, ‘Studying Abroad and the Effect on International Labour Market Mobility: Evidence from the Introduction of Erasmus’, *The Economic Journal*, vol. 121, no. 551, 2011, p. 194-222.

²⁷ T. Kuhn, ‘Why Educational Exchange Programmes Miss Their Mark: Cross-Border Mobility, Education and European Identity’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 50, no. 6, 2012, p. 994-1010.

²⁸ M. Otero, ‘The Socio-Economic Background of Erasmus Students: A Trend Towards Wider Inclusion?’, *International Review of Education*, vol. 54, no. 2, 2008, p. 135-154.

²⁹ Erasmus+ UK National Agency, ‘Higher education study or work abroad: student grant rates 2017-2018’

<https://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/higher-education-study-or-work-abroad-grant-rates-2017-18> (accessed 25 January 2018)



funding would also be flexible, allowing for amounts over normal grant top-up rates to be given when students can demonstrate necessity for it.

Accessibility can also be improved through a **targeted information dissemination campaign** to reach students who may have little family history knowledge of academic exchange, but who nonetheless can experience significant gains from the opportunity. This can involve increased liaison and information exchange between Erasmus administrators and financial aid administrators within participating higher education institutions. Financial aid administrators are well-placed to reach groups that may have previously had little awareness of Erasmus. They can also help ensure that Erasmus administrators are aware of the special needs and additional barriers that disadvantaged groups can face.

Given the high returns – to students in general but especially for the least well-off – the information campaign can emphasize Erasmus as an investment in one’s future: through an exchange, Erasmus students obtain hard and soft skills that make them more employable. When, in contrast, Erasmus is portrayed as a luxury where ‘personal growth’ is the only benefit, low-income youth are less likely to view it as worthy of their time and consideration.

To reach under-represented groups, measures can also be taken to make the program more flexible and responsive to student needs. For example, recent migrants (e.g. those who have arrived in the past five years) enrolled in higher education may be better served if they were allowed to do their Erasmus placement in a university within their new host country. Those who migrated at teens may still face integration challenges or be unfamiliar with all aspects of their new country by the time they attend university. Allowing them to do their exchange in a different area within their new home, rather than a third country, may be more rewarding. Such an exchange may also require fewer personal, financial, and administrative costs, thus reducing some of the barriers to participation.

Conclusion

Promisingly, the EU has indicated a strong commitment to supporting student mobility through Erasmus+. The continued success of the programme will depend on whether the benefits that Erasmus exchanges provide can be accessed by all European youth, rather than a privileged few. Unfortunately, policies focused on increasing the number of grants available, rather than increasing the grant amounts, risk excluding those who are already socio-economically disadvantaged. Without targeted measures to change this, it is likely that measures to grow the Erasmus program will only make more spots available to those who are socio-economically privileged, and will fail to reach others.

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