

# **The European mobility programmes: towards the 20% mobility by the year 2020?**

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## **Introduction**

The European Union gives a lot of emphasis on education. In particular, with the Bologna process, the EU has taken many steps in integrating the educational systems of all member states. The key means to achieve this educational integration are the wide-range of mobility programmes like Erasmus, Erasmus placements, Erasmus Mundus, Leonardo da Vinci, Marie Curie, etc. that enable students at higher education institutions to spend a period of study or placement abroad.

Rather than being an exception, as is currently the case, learning mobility should become a natural feature of being European and an opportunity open to all young people in Europe (Promoting the learning... 3: 2009). Especially, because thanks to learning mobility young people from all over Europe can exchange ideas, cooperate, learn from each others, gain new knowledge, and achieve mutual understanding. International mobility experience is just of immeasurable value for the academic and personal development of young Europeans.

However, even though the Bologna Process has certainly pushed positively student mobility, much remains to be done to increase the percentage of mobile students. Not only that the benefits of learning mobility have to be promoted among the students, but the problems, which have remained in the European education area ever since the launch of the first mobility programmes, have to be finally solved.

## **1. Status quo of European student mobility**

In 2009 the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education stated that in 2020 at least 20 percent of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) should have spent a study or training period abroad. Learning mobility as such was seen as a way to strengthen the academic and cultural internationalisation of European higher education. Moreover, mobility was recognised as an important opportunity for individuals' self-development and employability. (The Bologna Process... 4: 2009)

The European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) enables people at all stage of their lives to take part in stimulating learning experiences through its sub-programmes which fund projects at different levels of education and training in Europe. The most known of these are Comenius for schools, Erasmus for higher education, Leonardo da Vinci for vocational education and training, and Grundtvig for adult learning. For the timeframe 2007 to 2013 the LLP has a budget of nearly €7 billion. (The Lifelong Learning ... 2010)

In 2010, the European Commission launched a new flagship initiative "Youth on the Move". The initiative aims at helping young people to gain knowledge, skills and experience they need to enter the labour market successfully. Part of the EU's new *Europe 2020 strategy*, Youth on the Move proposes concrete actions aimed at making education and training more relevant to young people's needs and encouraging more of them to take advantage of EU grants to study or train in another country. (Youth on the Move - promoting... 1: 2010) This initiative can be seen as a strong step towards reaching the 20 percent of mobility by the year 2020.

However, there appears to be still a lack of progress in mobility, despite the fact that concrete goals are set for the learning mobility and the needed conditions are created with different mobility programmes. The EHEA member countries are not jointly working towards the set overall target and therefore cohesion may seem to be missing in tackling the present barriers in mobility. (Bologna with student... 8: 2009)

Learning mobility is nevertheless highly beneficial, as it leads to self-development through development of new linguistic and intercultural competencies (Youth on the Move – Strengthening... 2010). Mobility brings citizens closer to one another and improves mutual understanding. It promotes solidarity, the exchange of ideas and a better knowledge of different cultures, which helps to combat the risks of isolationism, protectionism and xenophobia that arise in times of economic crisis, and thus leading to a deepened sense of European identity and citizenship among young people. Mobility can also strengthen Europe's competitiveness by helping to build a knowledge-intensive society, as it boosts the circulation of knowledge. (European Quality Charter... 1: 2006; Promoting the learning... 2-3: 2009)

A number of barriers persist, however, that these keep many young people from even considering a stay abroad: time pressure to finish their studies or training, jobs, lack of funding, lack of language skills and intercultural knowledge, as well as a general reluctance to leave their home environment. (Promoting the learning... 7: 2009) It is doubtful, whether

the 20 percent mobility target can be reached by 2020, if these barriers are not tackled in an appropriate way.

Before the launch of Youth on the Move, a wide-scale consultation of the public and stakeholders active in the Higher Education Area was conducted by the European Commission with the *Green Paper on Mobility* in 2009. From the collected recommendations, relevant ideas for overcoming the existing obstacles in learning mobility and help to improve the overall mobility conditions for students could be drawn.

It is recognised that the quality of information and guidance on national and regional mobility opportunities and grant availability should be improved, both within and outside the EU. Member states should make use of new, creative and interactive ways to disseminate information and communicate with young people, including using ICTs and social networks, which are regularly used by youth. (Youth on the Move 10: 2010) Moreover language barriers were acknowledged. Linguistic and cultural preparation for mobility should become a core part of curricula by using also more creative methods for the delivery of language learning. One more barrier highlighted during the consultation are the financial constraints in mobility. Portability of grants and loans should be ensured. Furthermore, it was realised that the obligations of the sending institution are not finished with the end of the study period abroad, but the guidance to mobile learners should continue after their return with support for reintegration. (Youth on the Move 11-12: 2010)

Evaluations show also that despite longstanding arrangements, too often students who have undertaken learning mobility periods have difficulties in getting the recognition they had expected. According to the PRIME study of the Erasmus Student Network, only 2/3 of the Erasmus students – with a valid Learning Agreement signed prior to their stay abroad – had their courses fully recognised afterwards. Almost 30 percent received partial recognition leaving a minority of about 4 percent 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. (PRIME 2009 8: 2009) This damages those who are directly concerned and will clearly reduce enthusiasm for learning mobility more broadly. Young people need to be confident of a positive outcome of their period of mobility, otherwise they will be discouraged to participate in the learning mobility. (Promoting the learning... 7: 2009)

In conclusion, the European Commission has taken the right direction with involving the wider audience and relevant stakeholders in the consultation on development of the EHEA and improvement of existing mobility programmes. Even though the target to reach 20

percent of mobility by 2020 has been widely recognised, there are still several barriers to overcome, which are blocking the development process.

## **2. Reaching the 20 percent by 2020**

At the UNICA Student Conference 2010 in Rome, the students discussed the target to reach the 20% mobility by the year 2020 with the aim to work out a suitable strategic framework from the perspective of the mobile youth. It was debated if the goal is not too ambitious in the current economic circumstances.

As main components in the framework of increasing the mobility should be the benefits that mobile students gain from the study or training period abroad and the challenges that students have to face with learning mobility. Moreover, from the students' perspective the actual goal should not lie in the quantity of mobility, but rather in the increase of the quality and stability. If a high quality of mobility experience is secured, more students will want to go abroad. Thus, the quantity will also increase and reaching the 20% goal becomes more realistic. And on the other hand, higher quality brings more benefits. Therefore, to tackle the 20% target, first the benefits from learning mobility have to be defined for the youth and solutions for the challenges found.

### **2.1. Benefits of mobility through the eyes of students**

The most important thing for mobile students is that the benefits from the study or training period abroad are attainable. However, too often the benefits of learning mobility may not be sufficiently understood among young people themselves (Promoting the learning... 7: 2009).

From the students' perspective, the main benefits are connected with self-development. Thus, benefits like strengthening the European economical area or improving the mutual understanding are left in the background. Therefore, in the promotion of the different mobility programmes, the personal benefits should be highlighted.

From the academic perspective, the value of mobility lies in the academic diversity and eventual higher quality of courses. Moreover, students acknowledge that thanks studying in a foreign university, they experienced new and often more efficient ways of studying. Another benefit is of course the improved language skills.

In spite of the fact that the academic side of the mobility is in the center of all mobility programmes, for students the main benefits of mobility are connected to the development of soft-skills. It was stressed that thanks to a period abroad cultural diversity and awareness

can be fostered. The experience helps to get a wider-perspective of Europe, break stereotypes on different nationalities, and create a more objective image of your own country.

Students who have participated in mobility claimed to have achieved as a result of their experience a higher self-esteem and more self-confidence. They learned to act independently and be more flexible when it comes to managing new situations, as well as being more social and creating new contacts.

Therefore, the benefits can be categorised as academic and personal. These should be seen as core of the mobility experience, which motivates the students to spend a period of study abroad. These concrete benefits have to be enhanced and elaborated, as this will increase the quality of the experience and lead to increased participation in mobility.

## **2.2. Challenges to overcome**

In order to create value from the learning mobility to the students, the benefits have to be more substantial than the input. The input of students can be quantified as the challenges and problems which they have to face and overcome in order to take part in learning mobility. These barriers should be decreased in order to be able to reach the 20% by 2020 goal.

By analysing the current situation in the EHEA and the conditions of mobility, the following problematic areas can be defined:

- Provision of information
- Organisational arrangements
- Language barriers
- Financing
- Quality in Erasmus

By analysing the problems in the concrete areas, strategic recommendations for improvement of the mobility programmes can be made.

### *Provision of information*

Lack of provision of sufficient and useful information about the European mobility programmes has hindered the participation of many students. Three main sources of information were defined by the forum: universities (staff and students), the Internet, and the government.

First, universities should actively participate in advertising mobility programmes among students, and in encouraging them to spend a year or semester abroad. In addition, students

who have already participated in mobility programmes should promote the benefits of the experience within the student body. Universities are the key points where ideas are spread and therefore more efforts should be focused on educating the staff on how and what kind of information should be provided to students concerning learning mobility. For this purpose, a relevant department or office (depending on the size of the university) should be assigned with the sole task of promoting European mobility programmes, providing students with information about how to apply for them and how much funding is available, and providing students with general support prior to their departure for the host universities.

Not only universities but also national governments should actively promote and encourage participation in European mobility programmes. In order to stimulate an increase of student mobility at the national level, the government of every European country should take the initiative of promoting mobility. Even old-fashioned methods of propaganda are not excluded. For instance, wide media campaigns on the television and radio, or bill-boards with posters on the highways, are only some examples of how the government can facilitate the recruitment of students for mobility programmes. It is important to stress the opportunities which learning mobility offers to young people. The previously defined benefits should be advertised on popular channels and communication networks such as Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, and so on because their audience is mainly composed of young people.

The Internet is a vital source of information for the young generation. This is why a general website with all the information about mobility programmes should be created. It is important that participants and prospective participants in mobility have a handy source of information, which includes information from how to apply to where to turn for help in the city of the host institution. Therefore, it is essential to compile a website with all the information needed to respond to all questions and concerns that prospective mobile students might experience.

### *Organisational arrangements*

Careful preparation is the key to successful learning mobility and has to be at the heart of any project or programme. When young people are exploring mobility opportunities, they need access to information on options and funding, and guidance regarding their choice and on practical issues. (Promoting the learning... 6: 2009) The main problems concentrate on the practical arrangements before and at the start of the mobility period. This is often caused by bureaucratic procedures at sending universities or lack of competent staff at the faculties.

Before the mobility period, when a student gets interested in European mobility programmes, they may not get the qualified and needed support and advice by the faculty coordinators.

This can lead to the loss of interest for the student. Another recurrent problem is the lack of staff and in some cases one coordinator is responsible for an entire faculty, which is however not enough to provide the needed support and administrative help for all outgoing and incoming students. Thus, the universities should balance the relation between the number of mobile students and employed coordinators per faculty. Moreover, it is highly beneficial if the coordinators have had themselves an international study experience, as in this case they will understand the needs and problems of the students better. As was mentioned above, the support should not be targeted only to outgoing students, but also to incoming to help them integrate in the host country and to the returning students to help them reintegrate after their study or training period abroad.

A good way to enhance the satisfaction of foreign students is by offering them activities and support through the whole semester. Mostly, universities do not have the needed human or time resources for that and thus, following the example of many European universities, volunteer student organisations (like ESN, AEGEE) can be created, to offer services to international students. Even Students' Unions can be involved in the work with international students to help them integrate to the host community by getting to know also local students. Moreover, the contact with international students can lead to increased motivation to study abroad among the local students.

As the last organisational constriction, accommodation is still a major problem for exchange students. If there is uncertainty about accommodation at the host university, the students may turn down the mobility opportunity. It is clear that universities have problems with providing dormitory places for all incoming exchange students due to limited number of places, but in an ideal situation, each incoming student should receive a place in a dormitory. Nevertheless, even if this may not be possible, universities should be obliged to help the incoming students to find accommodation at an affordable price.

### *Language barriers*

Even though the foreign language skills of young Europeans are constantly improving, languages persist as a topic in the mobility discussions. The problem does not only lie in the low number of courses taught in English and the unequal level of language skills of exchange students, but also the unpopularity of not so wide-spread European languages.

On the one hand, English could be promoted as the common European language of higher education. Universities could be stimulated to provide all their courses or at least as many as possible in English to guarantee that every European student is able to spend a semester abroad without having to learn another language in addition to English. On the other hand,

students could be motivated and encouraged to learn the language of their host-country so that they are able to follow the courses in the national language. This would mean that language preparations should already start at least one semester before the stay abroad by taking intensive language courses at the home university so that students leaving their home country are able to communicate in the national language of the host country.

There are a lot of pros and cons for both solutions. As an example, there is no doubt that English is the dominating world language, at an economic, political, as well as at an academic level. Furthermore, almost every European student learns English already in elementary school which makes English usually the first foreign language of young Europeans. Moreover there are some serious concerns of countries where a rather small language is used even though at the same time Europe's linguistic diversity is a key part of its richness and it is important to ensure that countries with less spoken languages are also promoted as mobility destinations (Promoting the learning... 8: 2009).

Therefore, the choice is between unification and diversification. Unification would be without a doubt easier to implement, as nearly every European student speaks English at a relatively high level, and English has already become the world academic language. Even though it is more complicated to achieve diversification in the European university system, it should be supported. As a result, there are two recommendations which should be implemented. On the one hand, universities should be obliged to provide a certain percentage of their courses in English as well as offer basic language courses in every European language used in the countries where its students can go on an exchange programme. On the other hand, students should be obliged to learn the national language of the country they are going to before and during their stay abroad and attend at least one language course, and even better, a lecture in the national language. From this it follows that several points concerning student mobility have to be changed and improved. As such, students should have already at their home university a greater variety of languages to learn. The basic language courses should be free or at least easily affordable for all students. The host-university should be obligated to provide accompanying language courses and it should also set up a tandem system. This is already done in several European countries.

It seems quite clear that these measures would shortly result in a perceptible increase of student mobility because the language barrier which often leads students to set aside the possibility of doing a semester abroad would be eliminated.

*Financing*



Regardless of the statement of the European Commission that in the context of current international economic crisis the investment in education and training is crucial, financing of learning mobility remains still a problem (Promoting the learning... 2: 2009). The optimal solution would be to provide education that is free of fees and charges and therefore accessible to all socio-economic groups (Bologna with Student... 12: 2009).

The limited financial support through the scholarships of the European mobility programmes is the main limitation for many students to go abroad, as they often cannot work in the host country to finance the study abroad, the parents cannot support them, and they do not want to take a loan for a short-term exchange experience. This is especially the problem for student from lower-income families or countries. On the other hand, should a student work in the host country during the exchange period, the academic achievements might be damaged due to this. A solution to this could be rewarding students for academic achievements before and during their exchange period. This would motivate them to study more at the host university and would reduce the financial problems.

Therefore, a fair financing system, which considers the income level of the home country and academic achievements, is required to improve the existing scholarship system. This requires two changes. First, a fund should be added to the existing financing structure of the exchange programmes in order to provide extra support to students from low-income European countries. Second, this fund should be distributed according to two criteria: academic performance and family income.

### *Quality in mobility*

As already mentioned before, doubts regarding the quality of the exchange experiences through the European mobility programmes is discouraging some student. With an increase of the quality, the number of students participating in mobility programmes could be increased and the 20% by 2020 objective could be reached. Although all the defined benefits and already described barriers (e.g. organisational arrangements, provision of information) are influencing the quality of mobility, there are two relevant factors that have not been mentioned, yet. These are the recognition of courses and unbalanced mobility.

The Erasmus Student Charter (2010) states that Erasmus students are entitled to expect full academic recognition from their home university for credits achieved during the Erasmus study period, in accordance with the Learning Agreement. However, as the PRIME 2009 survey findings show, this is too often not the case.

Before undertaking mobility for education or training purposes, a learning plan, taking account of linguistic preparation, should be drawn up and agreed by the sending and hosting organisations and the participants. However, the persons signing the Learning Agreements are usually not the same who will have to recognise the courses and credits after the study period abroad. Therefore, the overall coordination at the universities should be improved and the professors should be involved from the initial state of the learning mobility preparations of a student. Another problem can be that the students just do not possess the needed information about their rights or the regulations. The coordinators at the university should provide special guidance on this matter. However, the main point is that the Learning Agreement should be also seen by the students as a binding contract the content of which has to be respected and students have to fulfil their obligations that arise with signing of the agreement.

Secondly, a drastic increase in mobility could be achieved, if the issue of unbalanced mobility could be solved. Currently there are some more popular countries that have more incoming students than outgoing students, and others where the situation is the opposite.. In order to prevent such imbalances, European governments should work in close cooperation with each other in order to achieve a coordinated Europe-wide strategy. This means that national campaigns advertising European mobility programmes should be coordinated at the EU-level. Governments should focus their efforts on promoting specific countries which are not so popular among students for various reasons, e.g. uncommon national language, not very good reputation of the universities, not very high standard of living, and so on. This problem should be addressed in the government campaigns which should convince students about why and how they can benefit from spending a year or a semester abroad in a country which does not receive many international students. The campaigns should be clear-cut in order to communicate to students that mobility is a key to their success in the future.

Furthermore, to achieve improved quality assurance, better involvement of students in the process is required (Bologna with Student... 2006). They can give the most accurate feedback and input on the improvements needed and therefore should be seen as important partners in quality assurance.

### **3. Conclusion**

Increasing the number of mobile students is essential for the development of European youth since it creates personal and academic benefits. The 20% by 2020 goal is a visionary target to aim at. However, the quality and stability of the mobility programmes are more vital in

contemporary society. There are still several challenges to be overcome in order to secure the increase in mobility.

Not only universities but also national governments should actively promote and encourage participation in European mobility programmes, while working in close cooperation with other European countries in order to achieve a coordinated Europe-wide strategy.

A fair financing system is required to improve the existing scholarship system. And this requires two changes. First, a fund should be added to the existing financing structure of exchange programmes in order to provide extra support to students from the poorest European countries. Second, this fund should be distributed according to two criteria: academic performance and family income.

Increasing the number of participants in mobility programmes is a worthy goal but we should make sure that quantity does not reduce the quality of the education or the mobility experience. Quality starts with good selection. Future participants in mobility programmes should be proficient in the appropriate language for their studies. Furthermore, Erasmus students should not be positively discriminated academically but treated as equals with local students.

In order to solve the problem concerning the recognition of courses attended abroad, professors must commit to the learning agreement, and they should be required to sign it before the student's departure. The learning agreement must be a binding contract for both parties.

The students should be able to benefit from language preparation both before their stay abroad and at the host universities. In addition, the European Commission should promote language programmes, such as the tandem programme. The universities should also be stimulated to offer more courses taught in English as well as encourage students to participate in mobility programmes in countries speaking uncommon languages.

The European Higher Education Area has made through an enormous development in the last years and even bigger changes are ahead. However, the students' point of view should be taken more into account. Some of these recommendations worked out by them are currently existing policies but they must be brought into practice in order to increase student mobility and the quality of education.

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