

## ESN contribution to Youth on the Move

### **Introduction**

Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is one of the biggest non-profit international student organizations. ESN is present in 341 Higher Education Institutions from 34 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 reaction to the Youth on the Move**

Erasmus Student Network welcomes the Youth on the Move flagship initiative and agrees with the Commission that Europe's future depends on its young people. Furthermore, ESN approves the general spirit of the paper, emphasizing the importance of education in general and student mobility in particular.

However, there are also some parts that could be improved. This will be further elaborated on here, first with some general remarks and then with some specific comments regarding certain parts. These comments are focused on, but not limited to, chapter four, which is the most important chapter concerning the interests of ESN.

In general, ESN believes that:

- The communication sets out very ambitious goals, which we support in many cases. We are not sure that all the goals will be met without a more detailed outline of how the proposed actions will be implemented. Regarding some of the ideas presented, the formulations are very vague, which makes it difficult for ESN to have any opinion at all. ESN would encourage the Commission to provide some indicators of the progress towards these goals on a quarterly basis.

- ESN would like to see a firmer commitment to finance some of the proposed actions. While there are some references to the financial situation (for example on p. 16, where the “EU-level student loan facility” is proposed), there are too many general suggestions in relation to the financial commitments that are needed in order to achieve these. The Erasmus Programme and other mobility programmes have increased in scope in recent years and are expected to increase even more in the future, which will raise the cost considerably. Furthermore, the amount of money that mobile students receive is in many cases not enough to spend a semester or a year abroad without additional financial assistance. The initiative should focus on gaining further financial resources for mobile students (p.9). This money should preferably come from the EU Commission, since national educational budgets are too often victims of severe cuts on the Member State level in times of economic problems.

In particular, ESN believes that:

- To lower the drop-out rate in secondary schools (p. 4), the Commission should promote the mobility of students from an early age and implement new training systems at schools to make mobility a desirable experience for all young people. Mobility can then be used as an effective tool for convincing young students not to drop out from their studies.
- The paper mentions that “many obstacles to mobility remain” (p. 8). This is, unfortunately, quite an understatement considering the present situation on student mobility in Europe. One of the biggest obstacles is the difficulty of recognition. The ECTS label should be implemented in all universities taking part in the Bologna process, in order to ensure that home universities acknowledge the courses and credits that their students will take abroad. This would increase the mobility of young students to a great extent.
- Learning mobility, which has never been properly recognized, requires further attention. After the ESN project on Problems of Recognition in Making Erasmus ([www.esn.org/content/prime-research](http://www.esn.org/content/prime-research)), ESN discovered that not all students get their Learning Agreement signed after returning from a stay abroad, and that the mobility period is often not recognized. The Commission should work on improving the recognition provided by the institutions, but also promote learning mobility in a way that it is recognized by society in general and future employers in particular.
- The idea of increasing the mobility rate to 20% of the European youth (p. 9) is an excellent aim that ESN fully supports, but it will be hard to achieve without greater recognition, additional financial support, etc. Virtual mobility (p. 9) could be a solution to achieve this goal, but it would be preferable that virtual mobility and physical mobility is *combined*, either at the same time or in different periods. A combination of both would create diverse opportunities for learning and enrich the knowledge of many students by giving them the possibility of studying in different universities either simultaneously or during different periods. Virtual mobility should in no way be seen as a substitute for physical mobility.

- The Youth on the Move website (p. 9) can be a good idea, if it is done properly. With regards to this, ESN recommends that
  - o All higher education institutions and other stakeholders providing mobility programmes should be provided with an opportunity to upload them on this website.
  - o There should be clear links on the website to all the other key actions proposed in the communication (for example the “Your first EURES job” and the “Youth on the Move card”).
- It is appreciated that the communication recognizes the obstacles to mobility, taking into account feedback from the consultation round of the 2009 Green Paper (p. 9-10). However, ESN is not sure that a “mobility scoreboard” is the best way to remove these obstacles. Even if the idea as such might be interesting, ESN needs to know more about this before supporting it.
- ESN sadly notices that there is no reference to the visa obstacles that mobile youth often face. ESN urges the Commission to propose a Council Recommendation on removing the barriers that are still present in many Member States.
- The “Youth on the Move card” (p. 10) could be a good idea, but just as in the example of the “mobility scoreboard” mentioned above, much more information about this is needed. Questions to be answered include:
  - o What is the exact purpose of the card?
  - o What problems are to be solved with this card?
  - o What will be included in the card?
  - o What will be done concerning validity, distribution, etc?
- ESN fully supports the idea of the “guidance on the European Court of Justice rulings on the rights of mobile students” (p. 10). This is indeed needed, as mobile students could face a number of problems during their stay abroad. ESN often receives complaints and request for help from students whose rights have been disregarded.
- Regarding the European Skills Passport (p. 10), ESN thinks that non-formal learning must be defined and recommends that the Commission proposes a green paper on non-formal education.
- The project “Your first EURES job” (p. 11) could be a good way to help mobile students, but some questions remain to be answered:
  - o Is this related to the website for information on EU learning and mobility programs?
  - o Is EURES not doing this already? What is the new thing here, apart from having a new name?

## Conclusion

ESN fully supports several of the goals and key actions set out by the Youth on the Move initiative. ESN further believes that in order to meet the ambitious targets outlined in the EU2020, youth mobility should be a main priority. However, if the Commission believes that Youth on the Move is the means to financial development and sustainability, a much firmer commitment to financial support of education and youth mobility is needed. In order to support some of the proposed measures, ESN would encourage a more complete description of them.