

# Policy Brief - UNESCO World Higher Education conference Barcelona 2022

**Title :** Equal access to quality mobility

## Summary

Mobility improves the quality of higher education. Students going on international mobility are learning new skills, new teaching methods and are connecting with young people around the world, thanks to which they develop intercultural communication competences<sup>1</sup>. Equal access to quality mobility should be a key part of higher education experience around the world. Even though there are already great programmes provided by national governments/institutions, it is crucial that Higher Education Institutions take an active role in promoting, organising and improving them. There is still a place for improvement in such areas as funding, formal and non-formal support, more inclusive mobility.<sup>2</sup> We strongly believe that Higher Education Institutions can improve the quality of the mobility programmes that they are offering. At the same time we see it as a big potential for Higher Education Institutions to develop a quality cooperation strategy with international student organisations who are supporting international students on a daily basis. Student organisations contribute not only to the quality support of incoming students but also to the development of intercultural and international communities. Providing quality cooperation and services to both Higher Education Institutions and student organisations can contribute to an overall better quality of mobility programmes and their participants' satisfaction.

## Policy Brief

There's no doubt education is one of the most important things in a person's life. Providing a good level of education for all young people around the world is an investment. Not only it allows each person to develop skills and get knowledge, but it's also an investment in the future for both local and international communities. A quality education guarantees each country a fair and competitive labour market, economic growth and better perspectives for young people in general<sup>3</sup>. As an organisation dealing with improving mobility we strongly believe that mobility has to play a key role in youth's education path. Taking part in exchange during higher education is a crucial factor of

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<sup>1</sup> Erasmus Student Network (2021). *Erasmus Skills. Guide for Practitioners*.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Parey M. & Waldinger F. (2008). *Studying Abroad and the Effect on International Labour Market Mobility: Evidence from the Introduction of ERASMUS*.

learning experience. Mobility allows students to develop intercultural skills, improve foreign language, boost independence and decision-making skills.<sup>4</sup> A quality mobility is a step to boost the future labour market by making it more diverse, intercultural and competitive. Moreover, taking part in international exchange boosts the civic engagement of young people which has a direct impact on shaping politics by getting young people to vote.<sup>5</sup>

When we speak about mobility of young people it is important to note that young people see the example coming from above. It's the role of teachers to encourage youth to go abroad during their studies. However, how can young people see the teachers and academic staff as an inspiration when they're not inspiring? It is crucial to boost the mobility of academic staff so they can become role models for their pupils. Such experience of course, serves the teachers themselves - they can learn different teaching methods, improve their language skills and live in the international community.<sup>6</sup> HEI should encourage their staff to take part in mobility, offer them a variety of mobility opportunities, workshops, courses etc. By improving the quality of teaching, the quality of learning increases.

Mobility offers a great experience for students, not only do they get extra knowledge, learn new skills and improve their intercultural competencies but it's also something that benefits their future work.<sup>7</sup> Seeing that mobility has so many beneficial aspects, it is crucial that every student has the same access to the opportunities offered by HEI. This concerns especially students with special needs and those with fewer opportunities.<sup>8</sup> All Higher Education Institutions need to have clear guidelines and support infrastructure for those students who might need extra help. It's recommended that all institutions have an office or an officer that would deal with mobility issues, offering guidelines, help and support for potential participants of exchange programs. Supporting the students in choosing the courses, obtaining visas, looking for accommodation or looking for travel options is something that students often mention as an area in which quality needs to be improved.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to offering support, it is essential to mention that each HEI should have clear and fair rules regarding the exchange<sup>10</sup> programs and information about the international mobilities should be easily accessible for students<sup>11</sup>. It is recommended that HEI has all the relevant information

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<sup>4</sup> Feyen B. & Krzaklewska E. (2012). *The ERASMUS Phenomenon - Symbol of a New European Generation?*

<sup>5</sup> Erasmus Student Network (2019). *ESNsurvey 2019 - Active citizenship and student exchange in light of the European elections.*

<sup>6</sup> Engel, C. (2010). *The impact of Erasmus mobility on the professional career: Empirical results of international studies on temporary student and teaching staff mobility.*

<sup>7</sup> Erasmus Student Network (2021). *Erasmus Jobs. A Comprehensive Competence Profile.*

<sup>8</sup> De Benedictis, L., & Leoni, S. (2021). *Inclusive universities: evidence from the Erasmus program.*

<sup>9</sup> Erasmus Student Network (2021). *Maybe it will be different abroad."Student and Staff Perspectives on Diversity and Inclusion in student exchanges".*

<sup>10</sup> Erasmus Student Network (2021). *Guidelines for Inclusive Mobility Promotion.*

<sup>11</sup> Rashid, A. (2019). *Canada-global South two-way student mobility: challenges and inspiring practices.*

regarding mobility accessible both on their website and in the International Office. Spreading awareness among students about where they can find relevant information, who to contact, what support they can count on, is an action that simplifies the whole process of recruitment, makes students feel more secure and supported by institution and at the same time international office has less work to do.<sup>12</sup>

Although it was said many times, it is important to point out that more funding for exchange programs should be taken into consideration. Supporting the students with grants is a crucial factor of the general satisfaction of participants. It is essential that students going abroad do not lose their scholarships at home and at the same time, once abroad, they have the same access to the social benefits of hosting institutions as local students. It is also important to underline that the financial support should be guaranteed on time, as delayed payments or total lack of them still are a major barrier in going for mobility abroad, especially since some payments sometimes need to be done in advance, for example, the deposit for accommodation or travel tickets.<sup>13</sup>

It is also recommended that HEI has a diverse offer of exchange programs. Going abroad for the whole year for studies is not possible for everyone and that's why it is important that universities offer different types of mobility to reach everyone's needs.<sup>14</sup> Apart from standard semester exchange programs, there are many other possibilities for students to be involved in, such as summer schools, internships or volunteering projects. By having a diverse offer we can ensure that more young people will have a chance to take part in the international exchange. This may be useful not only for students with fewer opportunities or with special needs but also for students of specific fields of studies, such as law or medicine, for whom staying abroad for a year or a half would mean lack of course recognition because of the programme differences. For those students it would be difficult to catch up after returning to home university, especially it is not what mobility objectives should be about. Because of that, it is reasonable to introduce a diverse offer of mobility opportunities to engage as many students as possible.

In order for HEIs to ensure a quality mobility it is crucial to gather feedback from the participants after the mobility period. Taking into account the challenges and problems that students have faced while on exchange, analysing them and constantly trying to improve the faults can ensure a quality experience for future participants.<sup>15</sup> Students must know who to contact to leave their feedback, ensuring at the same time that they know the relevant rules regarding their experience abroad so that they reflect on specific objectives, providing reliable information for universities to work on later. It would be reasonable to create a report each year that would provide information about participants' satisfaction, the problems and challenges they faced. Such a report should be available to the public to ensure the transparent work of HEI. Such report would also help students that are

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<sup>12</sup> Li, J. (2018). *Trends and Implications of International Student Mobility*.

<sup>13</sup> Souto-Otero, M., Huisman, J., Beerkens, M., De Wit, H., & Vujić, S. (2013). *Barriers to international student mobility: Evidence from the Erasmus program*.

<sup>14</sup> Erasmus Student Network (2021). *Guidelines for Inclusive Mobility Promotion*.

<sup>15</sup> Gunn, C., Friedrich-Nel, H., & Johansen, S. (2020). *International Student Mobility in Radiography: Agency and Experience*.

considering going abroad to prepare themselves for potential challenges they might face, to be aware of the general participants' satisfaction etc.<sup>16</sup>

Providing support for both outgoing and incoming students is a crucial part of exchange services. In this matter international student organisations are often taking a leading role, they are offering support for students there, where the institutions fail to do so. Sometimes the support concerns non-formal issues which usually are not well regulated at HEI. That's why those organisations should get more recognition from HEIs. Volunteers often help with matters connected to courses, visas, accommodation etc. It is recommended that all HEI cooperate with them and together they can create a common action plan in which they divide responsibilities and tasks between each other.<sup>17</sup> They can support each other while providing better services for international students who often need more attention and support. International students themselves highly rate student organisations support<sup>18</sup>. Moreover, international students organisations are a "bridge" between local and international students.<sup>19</sup> By organising the activities, engaging local communities, coordinating "Buddy" mentoring programmes they are able to link both communities and create an international environment at home.<sup>20</sup> Their work is crucial also for students that for some reasons don't decide to go abroad - thanks to organisations' work they can meet new people, learn about other cultures, boost their intercultural competences, learn useful skills - all of that without actually leaving their home country. Being active in an international student organisation makes young people develop skills and competences, such as working in the intercultural environment, leadership skills, organisatory skills that are useful for their future job. Investing in local student organisations is an investment as well. A good cooperation between universities and student organisations is beneficial for both parties and, what's more important, the bigger beneficiaries in this are students.

### **Recommendations**

The Erasmus Student Network would therefore recommend to Governments, Universities and stakeholders involved in Higher Education:

- Increasing UNESCO's role related to learning mobility, both credit and degree, carrying out more research in the topic and fostering collaboration
- Expand regional collaboration in the field of learning mobility, through the development of new programmes by regional organisations, with the support of UNESCO.
- Considering learning mobility as a central element of the Higher Education experience, aiming at providing a learning mobility opportunity to all students throughout their Higher Education journeys.

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<sup>16</sup> Weber, T., Popescu, F., & Iskandaryan, R. (2020). *EHEA international students mobility and transparency*.

<sup>17</sup> Wells, A. (2014). *International student mobility: Approaches, challenges and suggestions for further research*.

<sup>18</sup> European Commission (2021). *Erasmus+ Annual Report 2020*

<sup>19</sup> Erasmus Student Network (2021). *Maybe it will be different abroad."Student and Staff Perspectives on Diversity and Inclusion in student exchanges"*.

<sup>20</sup> Gresham, R. (2003). *Interaction between international students and local communities: can we make it happen, and if we do, what are the outcomes for the students, communities and universities?*

- To put in place the necessary support measures, including financial resources, to make those mobility opportunities available for all the students, regardless of their socio-economic background.
- Include community engagement in the development of internationalisation strategies to ensure a wider societal benefit.
- Involving students directly in the creation of internationalisation strategies at the institutional and national levels, increasing opportunities for internationalisation at home and fostering civic competences.
- Prioritise teacher and staff training in intercultural dialogue to unleash the potential of truly intercultural dialogues.