

EUROPEAN MOBILITY PROGRAMMES: CHAMPIONING EUROPEAN IDENTITY?

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Investing in young people through mobility programmes like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps can contribute to a more social Europe. Mobility equips young people with the skills for today's and tomorrow's labour market, while boosting active participation in society and the feeling of European identity.

Flagship initiatives of the European Union: Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps

The success story of Erasmus, launched under the Delors presidency, continues. Erasmus is certainly the most known programme across Europe and is one of the 2017 flagship initiatives of the European Commission. Over the past 30 years, the programme has given 9 million people an opportunity to study, train, volunteer or gain professional experience abroad.² This programme is now celebrating its 30th anniversary, which coincides with another emblematic celebration of European integration: the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome. However, this anniversary takes place in a moment where, more than ever, the European project is going through a phase of deep uncertainty. The 2015 Paris terrorist attacks led European policy-makers to focus on education as a way to foster tolerance, respect for diversity and civic responsibility. In such a fragile context, how the European Union (EU) will cope with these immediate problems will determine how the continent will fare in decades to come. In such a controversial moment for the future of the European project, where the EU is facing a 'polycrisis'³, "We do not just need firefighters, we need architects too".⁴ For this reason, President Juncker recently claimed that "More than anything, we need to invest in our young people" and launched a new mobility programme, the European Solidarity Corps.⁵

The Erasmus Programme started on 17 June 1987 under the Delors Commission. After a few years, its positive results led President Jacques Delors to declare: "How encouraging it is to see, as I have, the enthusiasm of students, teachers and businessmen who, as a result of the exchange schemes, have become active campaigners for a fifth freedom, perhaps the most important freedom of all, the freedom to exchange ideas and experience".⁶ While three decades ago this mobility programme targeted only students involved in higher education, the European Commission has progressively increased its scope of action. As a matter of fact, from January 2014 all the existing programmes were merged into the Erasmus+ programme. This now offers a wide range of opportunities for young people to expand their horizons by acquiring new skills through study, traineeships, apprenticeships, volunteering, youth exchanges and sporting activities.

In the same 'Erasmus' spirit, President Juncker launched the European Solidarity Corps in the 2016 State of the Union address, the first big speech after the vote on Brexit. With this programme, the Commission intended to set up a new brand, another flagship initiative like Erasmus. In that speech President Juncker argued: "There are many young, socially minded people in Europe willing to make a meaningful contribution and help show solidarity. We can create opportunities for them to do so [...] Solidarity is the glue that keeps our Union together".⁷ This new initiative, available up to the age of 30 years old, creates opportunities for people to volunteer or work in projects in their own country or in another Member State from two to twelve months. Participants can join a wide range of projects, such as assisting in centers for asylum seekers, helping to prevent natural disasters, or addressing different social issues in communities.

1. The Jacques Delors Archives – Presidency of the European Commission is available for consultation at the College of Europe (Bruges and Natolin), the Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po (Paris), the Historical Archives of the European Union (Florence), the Jean Monnet Foundation (Lausanne), the Charles University (Prague), the London School of Economics and the Université Catholique de Louvain. The archives detailed inventory is available on the website of the Jacques Delors Institute.

2. European Commission – Fact sheet "The Commission is today launching celebrations on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the start of Erasmus, one of the most successful programmes of the European Union", Brussels, 26 January 2017.

3. Speech by President Jean-Claude Juncker at the Annual General Meeting of the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises, Athens, 21 June 2016.

4. Jacques Delors: "En Europe il faut le pompier mais aussi l'architecte", interview by Sébastien Maillard and Jean-Christophe Ploquin, *La Croix*, 14 October 2012.

5. Jean-Claude Juncker, *Authorised version of the State of the Union Address 2016: Towards a better Europe - A Europe that protects empowers and defends*.

6. Jacques Delors, *Address given by Jacques Delors to the European Parliament*, 17 January 1989, Bulletin of the European Communities, N. Supplement 1/89. Luxembourg, 1989.

7. Jean-Claude Juncker, *Authorised version of the State of the Union Address 2016*.

The mobility experience multiplies opportunities for participants, creating positive externalities. As an example, mobility equips young people with the skills for today's and tomorrow's labour market and improves their prospects for a successful career. However, the Erasmus experience has a far greater impact than just mobility across Europe and beyond. In fact, research shows that the programme plays an important role in fostering trust towards other Europeans, boosting active participation in society and the feeling of a European identity. Furthermore, the programme also creates positive externalities towards the rest of society, when, for example, students interact with their 'host' communities.⁸ Additionally, after their period abroad, people become ambassadors of European integration, identity and values, when students return to their home countries.

Cross border experiences and European identity: evidence from research

More than being a premise, European identity is at the core of the European political project.⁹ For decades, the Commission has underlined the importance of fostering a European identity in its pursuit of "an ever closer Union".¹⁰ Indeed, as Jacques Delors argued, "we will not succeed with Europe solely on the basis of legal expertise and economic know-how".¹¹ With this in mind, the Erasmus programme was launched "to strengthen the interaction between citizens in different Member States with a view of consolidating the concept of a People's Europe".¹² 30 years later, it is now regarded as one of the biggest success of the EU, directly achieving the purpose of promoting a common European identity among young people.¹³

Although the objective of promoting a European identity, as proclaimed in 1987, has always characterized the mobility narrative of the Commission, its relevance has had a variable intensity in relation to the different political phases. For instance, the Barroso I and II Commission chose to stress the narrative on greater employability, rather than the identity factor. Today,

especially after the 2015 terroristic attack and Paris Declaration, we saw a resurgence of the importance of shared European values and fostering a European identity has become highly relevant again. Indeed, the European Commission recently highlighted that "one of the core strategic interests of mobility in Europe is the promotion of a European identity".¹⁴

Nowadays, many authors look at the Erasmus programme as a relevant tool in fostering European identity. For instance, Fligstein claims that the main source of a European identity is the "opportunity to positively interact on a regular basis with people from other countries".¹⁵ He adds that "it is the people who are involved in such interactions that are the most likely to come to see themselves as Europeans and involved in a European national project".¹⁶ As the survey on the implementation of Erasmus+ showed, more than 83% of the Erasmus students felt more European after their stay abroad.¹⁷ In this study, the type of Erasmus mobility activity did not play a considerable role in relation to the increase in European identity.¹⁸ All groups of students in the different Erasmus+ actions showed very similar results. They claimed that their European perspective was improved considerably by this mobility experience. Overall, we can consider that there is a "clear relationship between Erasmus participation and enhanced European identity".¹⁹ Research has shown that, "among those who began the study 'never' self-identifying as European, transnational contacts help to explain why Erasmus students have a greater tendency than non-mobile students to start identifying as Europeans".²⁰ Moreover, "prior to studying abroad, the mobile and non-mobile groups are indistinguishable on the basis of their identification *as* European and their identification *with* Europe. It is only once Erasmus participants have gone abroad that significant differences develop between the two groups".²¹

Erasmus+: escalating opportunities through an increased budget

The overall budget of the programme has increased significantly since 1987. Looking at the current

8. Karina Obourne, "Becoming more European after Erasmus? The impact of the Erasmus programme on political and cultural identity", in *Epiphany - Journal of transdisciplinary studies*, vol. 6, n. 1, 2013.

9. Alina Polyakova and Neil Fligstein, "Is European Integration Causing Europe to Become More Nationalist? Evidence from the Recent Financial Crisis", *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 23, 2013.

10. European Council, *Solemn declaration on European Union*, Stuttgart, June 1983.

11. Jacques Delors, "Speech at the Conference of European Churches" (CEC), February 1992.

12. European Council, Council decision of 15 June 1987 adopting the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS), MEMO/87/59, Brussels.

13. European Commission, "The Erasmus Impact Study. Effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalization of higher education institutions", Luxembourg, 2014.

14. *ibid.*

15. Neil Fligstein, "Who are the Europeans and why does this matter for politics?", in J. Checkel, & P. Katzenstein, *European Identity*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

16. *ibid.*

17. European Commission, *The Erasmus Impact Study. Effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalisation of higher education institutions*, Luxembourg, 2014.

18. *ibid.*

19. Kristine Mitchell, "Rethinking the 'Erasmus Effect' on European Identity", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 53, n. 2, 2015.

20. *ibid.*

21. *ibid.*

Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), it is clear that European decision-makers are willing to allow more and more young people to benefit from this experience. The amount of funds allocated to the programme in 2014 is expected to double by the end of 2020 (Table 1). In 2017, for instance, the budget increased by 16,2%. Thanks to this increase in budget, the programme is expected to give extended opportunities for individuals to study abroad, which will be raised from slightly below 500 000 in 2014 to above 800 000 in 2020, totaling over 4 million learning mobility opportunities throughout the period 2014-2020.²² Therefore, with a strong added-value in its transnational mobility activities, the EU is contributing to skills development, employability of students and less likelihood of unemployment.²³

Recently many scholars and policy-makers have started to rethink the EU's budget priorities post-2020 knowing that the Commission is increasingly prone towards linking budget allocations with visible results. For instance, the Monti report, published in December 2016, stressed the European added-value as a necessary precondition for reform.²⁴ This report follows the recent trend introduced in 2015, when European

Commission Vice-President Kristalina Georgieva launched the EU Budget Focused on Results (BFOR). This initiative aimed to maximize the Union's budget effectiveness in supporting growth, jobs and stability in Europe and beyond. More precisely, it was claimed that "the EU Budget should focus on results as much as on absorption, rebalancing spending compliance with performance".²⁵ Besides, the Monti report noticed that "some EU policies with the potentially highest added value also coincide with areas at the conventional core of nation-states' sovereignty",²⁶ such as in the case of education.

To conclude, a clear priority is to ensure that the policy context of Erasmus+ and its potential successor programme beyond 2020 remain relevant to the needs of the European Union and its citizens. Although the Juncker Commission has capitalized effectively on the 30th anniversary to shed light on policies for education and youth and foster dialogue on the future of the EU, the introspective process recently started must not stop. Moreover, the allocation of a bigger proportion of the budget under the next MFF to Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps is highly recommended. Without that, mobility programmes will continue to affect only a relatively small number of students, and their Europeanizing effect, while impressive, will still be limited. By doing this, the European Union will be able to rely on effective tools to empower its young people and, ultimately, promote a stronger sense of belonging to Europe.

22. European Commission, Statement of estimates of the European Commission for the financial year 2017, June 2016.

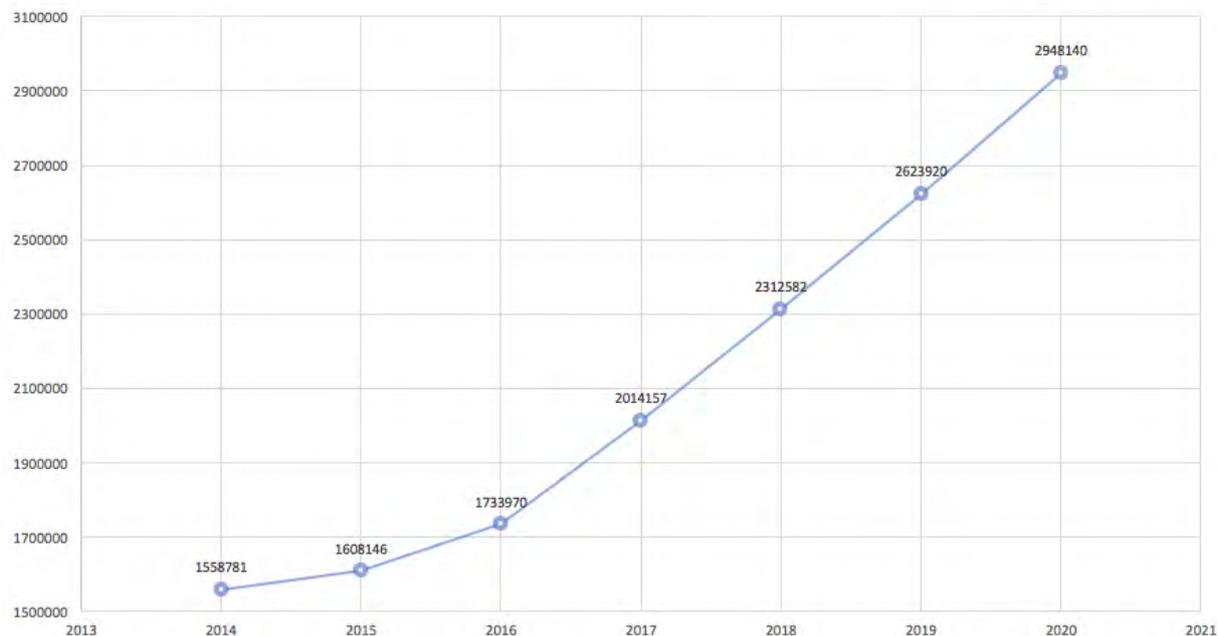
23. Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and to the Council. Mid-term review/revision of the multiannual financial framework 2014-2020 An EU budget focused on results, Brussels, 14 September 2016.

24. European Union, "Future financing of the EU", final report and recommendations of the High Level Group on Own Resources, December 2016.

25. *ibid.*

26. *ibid.*

TABLE 1 ► Budget 2014-2017 and financial programming 2018-2020 heading 1a- Erasmus+ (in Euros)



Source : adapted from European Commission, Statement of estimates of the European Commission for the financial year 2017, June 2016.

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