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Making learning mobility the norm in the EU

More than 40 years after the launch of the Erasmus programme, fewer than one out of four young people in the EU benefitted from a mobility experience

In November, the European Commission unveiled its Skills and Talent Mobility package, as envisaged during the 2023 European Year of Skills. Central is a proposal – 'Europe on the Move' – aiming to update the European Union's mobility framework to enhance learning-mobility opportunities for all. The overarching ambition is gradually to establish learning mobility as the norm in the European Education Area, rather than an exception.

Today in the EU, fewer than one in seven graduates in higher education and one in 16 students undergoing vocational education and training (VET) benefit from a learning experience abroad. Despite the progress in the last decade to facilitate learning mobility, the path towards free movement of learners in the EU is still hindered by obstacles, which the Commission's proposal sets out to remove.

Transforming its positive intent into tangible outcomes depends on member states' action: they have to turn the recommendations into national action plans, guiding their work until 2030, and will need to mobilise all relevant stakeholders. While the Commission's initiative is more than welcome, alone it will not be sufficient to make learning mobility the norm in Europe. Achieving this goal will also require the EU and member states to bolster the resources available.

Chances and Challenges

Fostering learning mobility offers many advantages, individual and collective. Mobile learners acquire skills crucial for their personal, educational and professional growth, boosting their employability. Economically, learning mobility can help mitigate skills shortages, which 74 per cent of small and medium enterprises in Europe reportedly are facing. Socially, learning mobility contributes to a sense of European

citizenship and understanding of the values common to Europe.

Recognising the advantages of mobility and the imperative to enhance it, European decision-makers have implemented various initiatives over the last decade to encourage learner mobility within the EU. These include an 80 per cent increase in the Erasmus+ budget for 2021-27 to €26.2 bn, the adoption of a Council of the EU recommendation in 2018 which promotes automatic mutual recognition of higher-upper-secondary education qualifications, as well as outcomes of learning periods abroad. Moreover, the establishment of a mobility scoreboard in order to monitor and evaluate the progress of European countries in facilitating learning mobility.

The third barrier is that recognition of qualifications and credits acquired abroad is not always straightforward.

The Commission's latest proposal for a council recommendation on learning-mobility opportunities for everyone is a new building-block in this endeavour. Different studies of learning mobility have consistently identified four key barriers to its effective realisation. First and foremost is lack of finance. This is compounded by a lack of portability of domestic grants and loans: students often encounter restrictions in using these for studying abroad.

The second barrier is lack of awareness about mobility opportunities. Indeed, in a 2023 Eurobarometer survey, young respondents, when asked about the barriers to securing cross-border traineeships, identified as one of the main ones insufficient information and guidance. A recent study highlighted that one third of the education systems in the EU have neither a strategy nor any large-scale initiatives to address information and guidance on outward student mobility; the same proportion still do not have a website collating all key information on learning-mobility opportunities.

The third barrier is that recognition of qualifications and credits acquired abroad is not always straightforward. A recent report on the implementation of the 2018 recommendation on mutual recognition of qualifications emphasises that substantial additional efforts are required to make automatic recognition a reality in the EU.

The last barrier for some learners is a lack of the necessary foreign-language skills. All these continuing challenges call for systematic effort to remove the barriers to learning mobility and enable more students to benefit from such experiences.

Aiming for accessibility

With its Europe on the Move proposal, the Commission is setting an ambition with concrete objectives: to boost the share of individuals in the EU benefitting from learning abroad, to enable learning mobility for everyone (not only young people) and to promote inclusiveness, sustainability and innovation in the process. It proposes two new EU-level targets by 2030: at least 25 per cent of graduates in higher education and 15 per cent of VET learners should benefit from a learning experience abroad.

To achieve these targets, the proposal foresees several initiatives which should help lower the barriers: the increasing awareness about learning-mobility opportunities for different target groups, an improved recognition of qualifications and learning periods aborad, lowering the burden of learning-mobility applications and making the opportunities more inclusive. These complement the increase of the Erasmus+ budget in place since 2021.The targets are indeed ambitious. The current share of graduates benefitting from a learning-mobility experience is around 15 per cent and for VET learners less than 7 per cent. Yet, even if they were to be achieved by 2030, we would be far from a scenario where learning mobility was the norm. More than 40 years after the launch of the Erasmus programme by the then Commission President Jacques Delors in 1987, fewer than one out of four young people in the EU would benefit from a mobility experience. Without a significant increase in the national and European means allocated to this purpose, learning mobility will remain a minority privilege.

To make learning mobility a norm rather than the exception, continuing to increase the resources for mobility grants will be critical.

Increasing the share of people benefitting from a learning experience is not the only objective of the proposed new framework. So is making learning mobility more inclusive: at least 20 per cent of all learners benefitting from mobility abroad should be individuals with fewer opportunities. To this end, the Erasmus+ programme foresees extra funds for learners with special needs, from disadvantaged backgrounds or from remote areas. As the Erasmus Student Network highlights, however, Erasmus+ grants are not keeping pace with high inflation, pricing out many poorer students.

The Commission proposal rightly emphasises apprentices' mobility, as they face more barriers than students from higher education. In the last ten years, the Commission has taken several initiatives to facilitate VET

learners' mobility – such as the adoption in 2015 of ErasmusPro, a programme for long-duration mobility of VET learners – but more determined action is needed.

The proposal presents a coherent policy framework, advancing short-term incremental changes and elements of a comprehensive, long-term strategy. These include: leveraging centres of vocational excellence for international co-operation, appointing mobility co-ordinators, streamlining administrative processes, providing language preparation, pursuing communication campaigns on learning-mobility opportunities for VET students and encouraging cross-border collaborations among SMEs.

Removing regulatory, information and linguistic barriers will be key to facilitating learning mobility and should be a priority, given all the individual and collective benefits of mobility. For the EU, it is certainly the best way to promote European citizenship among young people.

In addition to Erasmus+ funding, synergies need to be built with other EU funding instruments – such as the EURES Targeted Mobility Scheme funded by the European Social Fund Plus – at EU, national and regional levels. To make learning mobility a norm rather than the exception, continuing to increase the resources for mobility grants will be critical.

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