



**PARTICIPATION ERASMUS ALUMNI
FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Final Report

PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ERASMUS+

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Erasmus+



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PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ERASMUS+

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This report was written in the context of the **TCA Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement (PEACE)**, coordinated by INDIRE/Erasmus Agency Italy, and more in particular, in relation to the International seminar of PEACE, held in Malmö, Sweden, 1-4 October 2023. The author expresses his gratitude to the organizers of the event of the Swedish Council for Higher Education and the INDIRE/Erasmus Agency Italy, as well as to Arjan Verdooren, co-convenor of the event on the morning of 2 October.

Section 1

Introduction

Participation Erasmus Alumni for Civic Engagement (PEACE) is a Long-Term Action with an original mission: exploring the relation between social and civic engagement, political participation, and European citizenship, on one hand, and the Erasmus+ Programme, on the other. In fact, the priorities of the Erasmus+ Programme include the creation of

opportunities for people's participation in democratic life, social and civic engagement through formal or non-formal learning activities. The focus is put on raising awareness of and understanding the European Union context, notably as regards the common EU values, the principles of unity and diversity, as well as their social, cultural and historical heritage (EC 2023: 10).

This report – the second one in the PEACE Action - contributes to the debate by discussing the importance of and relevance of civic and political competences in the context of the Erasmus+ programme, as well as in relation to wider European citizenship. International mobility may in that sense be understood as a form of “testing ground” for European citizenship, in which difficulties such as socio-economic inequality, exclusion, discrimination and the lack of a true transnational European society and public sphere manifest themselves in a myriad of ways. In fact, Erasmus+ attempts to help overcome such difficulties by stimulating inclusion, pluralism and inter-cultural forms of knowledge. In this sense, the Erasmus+ programme may be equally of great relevance for the ongoing discussions of the Future of Europe, and the way in which core challenges regarding citizenship, inclusion, non-discrimination may be addressed more effectively in the future.

An important question for European citizenship is: what do we actually mean by civic and political engagement in Europe, and what are the relevant key competences? Such competences classically relate to elections and voting (of great relevance in relation to the upcoming European Parliament elections of June 2024). Civic and political competences however also go beyond the electoral dimension, for instance in the form of practical skills regarding participatory, interactive/communicative, critical, and deliberative skills. An additional dimension is that of civic culture, in relation to recognizing equality and humanity, respecting rights, acting responsibly, and promoting the common good. A core, outstanding question hence remains the extent to which Erasmus+

stimulates active political awareness, political and human rights literacy, and the development of a political sense of European citizenship.

The second part reports on the fruitful and intense discussions and deliberations held at the international conference 'Participation and Civic Engagement in Erasmus+', held in Malmö, Sweden, on 1-4 October 2023. At the event, various deliberative roundtables were organized with a total of more than 100 participants. Three topical and politically sensitive themes in relation to the EU – gender inequality, Europe and its colonial past, and the distinction between Eastern and Western Europe - were introduced in the plenary, accompanied by a main discussion statement. These were subsequently the basis for deliberation by participants in more than 10 roundtables. The report provides brief recollections of the main points of discussion in the roundtables.

The third part discusses Malmö's 'Train the Trainers' session for a range of different Erasmus+ participants (such as students, Ambassadors, staff from National Agencies, members of the Erasmus Student Network, teachers and educators). This training dealt with three main thematic fields of relevance to Erasmus+: youth political and civic engagement; European citizenship education; and social inclusion, diversity, non-discrimination. These fields were briefly introduced in the plenary, accompanied by a main thesis, and subsequently debated by participants in over 10 roundtables, helped by a facilitator. The key goals of the training were: deeper knowledge with regard to civic and political themes in international mobility/Erasmus+ (*knowledge*); awareness of the multiple civic and political dimensions of the Erasmus+ programme (*awareness*); development of a critical-constructive view (*critical-reflexive mindset*); and participatory and conflict-resolution (*learning to participate*). The various group discussions are briefly reconstructed per theme.

The debates and group discussions in Malmö have raised numerous important insights, which will feed into future debates within the PEACE Action, will inspire some of the outputs of the Action (including E-modules), and will hopefully encourage other actions and events, and stimulate wider debate on civic and political engagement among European mobile citizens.

Section 2

Civic and political competences in Erasmus+

1. What question are civic and political engagement and skills the answer to?

Civic and democratic engagement are a clear priority, not least with regard to young people, of whom it is expected that they do not only develop professional skills during their educational lives, but equally civic and political competences. In fact, civic engagement is one of the *four core objectives* of the Erasmus+ programme.

In broader societal terms, this attention to civic and political engagement is due to various challenges and crises that affect European societies. In other words, the strengthening of civic and political competences and more broadly *democratic and rule of law cultures* are seen as the only answer to bring stability to our democratic societies.

One challenge regards increasing levels of *polarization* and forms of *closed group thinking* on core issues (e.g. climate change, migration, the EU itself), and even forms of *radicalization* in society (with increasing levels of political violence). Different groups in society are increasingly in opposition to each other, making democracy as a form of peaceful conflict resolution increasingly difficult.

Another challenge is the increasing *exclusion* of groups in society, who feel not represented by politics and who less and less participate in collective life (e.g. NEETs, migrant groups).

A further challenge that affects the European project directly is the resurgence of *nationalism* and the view of the European Union is a menace for national identity and sovereignty. European integration is being seriously put to the test.

In this sense, a final challenge is the lack of extensive debate on the *Future of Europe* itself, beyond the EU institutions.

The Erasmus programme and political engagement

But we can also look more specifically at *international mobility* and the *Erasmus+ programme* itself, and ask ourselves, what is the civic and political engagement dimension all good for? Here, there are equally important challenges to bring out.

The functional, instrumentalist dimension of the programme, in relation to *employability* and *individual skills development* is clearly essential but tends to be largely individualistic and competition-oriented. A more developed component in the Erasmus+ programme that deals with solidarity and collective engagement might importantly strengthen the European citizenship dimension.

A further – in some ways little discussed dimension – in international mobility regards *forms of exclusion* (including of specific minority groups or nationalities, and gender-bias). Sure enough, some attention is being paid to financial and materials difficulties, and the fact that people from less wealthy socio-economic backgrounds are much less inclined to participate in international mobility. But other, equally important factors of exclusion, related to migrant or ethnic backgrounds, with regard to specific nationalities, or having to do with gender identity, are hardly discussed. In fact, there is very little systematic data on the ethnic or migrant background of participants in the Erasmus programme, nor of gender identity beyond the classical male/female distinction. Also, the peculiarity of international mobility having a conspicuous gender-bias towards female participants is not discussed in its complexity.

All these identity-related dimensions have a clear civic and political dimension. In fact, the Erasmus+ programme is about *inclusion*. It is however difficult to be inclusive if we do not know extensively what the exclusionary factors and barriers may be and how these manifest themselves in reality. What is in particular important is a close analysis of forms of intersectionality, that is, the overlapping and accumulating forms of exclusion, for instance in the form of ethnic, socio-economic, and geographical background of participants.

Another internal as well as external challenge is how Erasmus contributes to debates on European citizenship and understandings of what citizenship means in practice. As mobile Europeans, Erasmus participants would have an awful lot to say about how it is being mobile (as a kind of ideal-type of European citizenship). As the sociologist Adrian Favell already noted 15 years or so ago, even for the “Eurostars”, mobile professionals in Europe, being mobile is not always easy and includes a various difficult challenges (Favell 2011). A broader debate about these mobile experiences should feed into debates in European citizenship.

In a related way, the discussion on the Future of Europe is clearly important for the Erasmus+ programme. It is not clear how such a relationship is however being exploited in reality. One example is the recently held European Citizens' Panel on Learning Mobility, where National Agencies and the Erasmus Student Network were involved, but where ultimately important questions – related to citizenship, inclusion, non-discrimination – were not systematically addressed.

European Citizens' Panel on Learning mobility

The European Commission held a European Citizens' Panel on Learning Mobility, in the Spring of 2023, from 3 March until 30 April. The panel was a follow-up to the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021-2). The panel took the form of a citizens' deliberative assembly, which is intended as a way of bringing European citizens closer to decision-making and to provide a platform for citizen participation. The panel on Learning Mobility contributed to preparatory work for a Council Recommendation on learning mobility and to informing the European Commission on the topic. Three deliberative sessions were held, two in Brussels and one online. 142 randomly selected European citizens (with a third of young people) debated on learning mobility and the general question of how to make mobility accessible to everyone. Deliberations focussed on the identification of target groups for learning mobility, as well as the discussion of challenges and obstacles to access learning mobility. The final session included the adoption of 21 final recommendations. These included:

- A vehicular language (lingua franca) as a tool for learning mobility (recommendation 1)
- Expansion of existing learning mobility programs for people of all ages and socio-economic layers (Recommendation 3)
- Expansion of existing learning mobility programs for people of all ages and socio-economic layers (Recommendation 4)
- Enabling learning mobility for families (Recommendation 5)
- Ambassadors for a more mobile Europe (Recommendation 11)
- For greener learning mobility! (Recommendation 13)
- Measures and activities to promote non-discrimination in learning mobility (Recommendation 18)

Source: https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/learning-mobility-panel_en

2. What are civic and political competences?

Let us now take a closer look at civic and political competences. What do we actually mean by *civic* and *political competences* or civic and political skills? Classically, civic and political competences were seen as in close relationship to voting, as electoral democracy has been the main democratic system since the 1950s. A core dimension in this is *cognitive*, that is, distinctive knowledge of politics, of institutions, of the rules of the game. We could call this the ideal of the “*informed citizen*”. Such knowledge relates to understanding of the components and principles of democracy, knowledge of how institutions work, and knowledge of legal and constitutional rules.

Modern democracy has however gone through importance changes and has developed much beyond mere individual participation in voting. In fact, “spaces of participation” have multiplied and various experiments with the democracy are being held (such as the recent Conference on the Future of Europe, and the subsequent European Citizens’ Panels – the one on Learning mobility is discussed above – organized by the European Commission).

Hence, rather static knowledge of the institutions and rules is not enough (even if with regard to the EU it has to be admitted that a lot of work remains to be done). Civic and political competences are not just about acquiring knowledge but equally about *practice, practical skills and experience on the ground*. Such competences include skills that are closer to a kind of *researcher’s mindset*: identifying and describing information, analysing and explaining information, synthesising information, evaluating, taking position and defending a position, critical thinking and thinking constructively).

It also includes more *practical, hands-on capacities*, such as *participatory skills* (interacting with others, being able to monitor public events and issues, communication and deliberative skills, being able to influence decisions, identify self-interests and act upon them, have organizational skills).

And finally, civic and political competences relate to distinctive dispositions or value outlooks, classically referred to as *civic culture* (recognizing equality and humanity, respecting rights, acting responsibly, promoting the common good).

It needs to be recognized that that the actual understanding of civic and political competences is itself political, that is, where do we stand in terms of our views of democracy and citizenship. A type of citizenship, let us call it “*broadly responsible*” or *minimalist*, may stress only *good, responsible and law-abiding behaviour* as important for being a citizen, whereas *participatory understandings* also put emphasis on being *participating in community structures*, while “*justice*

oriented” views stress active questioning of the system and trying to counter injustices.

To be effective in a more complete sense as a citizen acquires more than just knowledge, participatory and practical skills, and cultural disposition. It clearly requires, to be successful, social capital or the right networks and it requires resources.

3. Erasmus+: Political and democratic engagement, exclusion and lack of inclusion

Civic and social engagement and participation receive a lot of lip service in European policies, not least in the Erasmus+ programme (as in volunteering, youth internships and work), or also in other programmes, such as the European Solidarity Corps. For the Commission there is a link between civic and political engagement: it holds that democratic participation ‘can also be targeted through non-formal learning activities, which aim at enhancing the skills and competences of young people as well as their active citizenship’.

It is, however not clear what this means in practice, that is, it is not evident how civic, community – often very local - engagement actually contributes to **active political awareness, political and human rights literacy**, and the **development of a political sense of European citizenship**. Moreover, as stated in a recent report of the European Parliament Research Service, in Erasmus+’s KA1 – on student and teacher mobility – there is no explicit focus on political citizenship, but participants rather ‘experience *social and cultural elements* of citizenship’ (2021: 54), there tends to be less attention for explicit political issues, and there is a lack of a structural, explicit attention to European citizenship.

Hence, **one the core objectives** of PEACE is to discuss and debate, explore, and develop the civic and political dimension – and related dimensions such as political engagement and activism, a critical mindset, and EU political knowledge - and explicitly develop a series of innovative ideas and proposals how civic *and* political engagement may be stimulated in a range of different but interconnected, more systematic ways.

The PEACE project contributes not only to a more robust development of civic and political training within the Programme, but also engages in more intense reflection and debate on, as well as analysis of crucial political issues within the programme, that is, in relation to *inclusion* and *diversity*. These themes include matters of gender bias in Erasmus+ and the relation of the programme to forms

of gender inequality. It also relates to the history of European integration, and the role of colonialism in the process. This sounds perhaps as a far stretch, but in fact it relates to European citizens with migrant backgrounds and those tied culturally to colonial or former colonial territories. A further important issue is also the differences between different parts of Europe, not least those between East and West. In particular, in the light of the currently prominent discussion on Enlargement, this is equally of great relevance for Erasmus+.

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Section 2

Erasmus+: equality, inclusion, diversity

The collective deliberation consisted in brief introductions to specific topics by two experts, and subsequent deliberative, group discussions – amongst different people involved in the Erasmus+ programme (such as students, Ambassadors, staff from National Agencies, members of the Erasmus Student Network, teachers and educators). The three themes were:

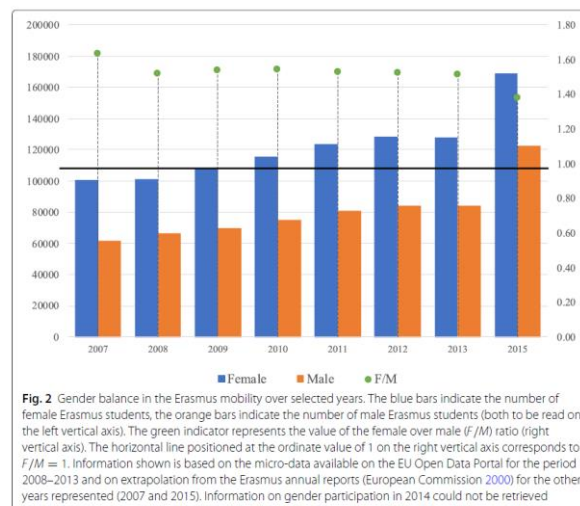
- gender inequality;
- Europe and its colonial past;
- East-West distinction.

Gender equality

Background: The Erasmus+ programme sees the overwhelming participation of women in international mobility. This appears as a positive phenomenon, and we might expect that the over-representation of women would contribute to changes in gender imbalances in the future.

Nevertheless, there are some striking issues (with political dimensions, relating to discrimination, equality and equal treatment) that remain little discussed.

Female students are more prominently participating in non-STEM areas, whereas STEM is still predominantly male (even in societies known for gender-equality).



Source: De Benedictis and Leoni 2020: 7.

The Erasmus programme still has a very small number of projects on gender issues (in 2017 estimated 1,2 %).

Reflections: To what extent does the Erasmus programme contribute to gender equality through a) changes in mentality, b) enhanced access to labour markets?

What is the main “push factor” for female students to become mobile? To what extent is it because of lack of opportunity in their home countries? Are there major differences between countries? How should the Erasmus program respond to this?

In general, how does the Erasmus+ programme relate to inclusion, in relation to women (and their social mobility), but regarding (non-Cis) men and people of

Group discussions – gender equality

Key remarks

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Women appear as overrepresented in the programme and in education in general.

Female participation reflects the subjects and the priorities of Erasmus+ and of the main projects. Women are more interesting in the priorities of the Erasmus+ Program since they are frequently working in education, often they are mothers, they are more sensitive towards social inclusion.

Significant differences however exist between academic disciplines.

A more inclusive and equal educational system as well as labour market would need to start from primary school education.

One significant problem is the lack of women in leading positions. Problems are cultural (prejudices/stereotypes) as well as economic.

Gender balance in the execution of tasks in the family is an important issue.

Focus should be on all gender types.

Structural problem: there is no specific focus on gender issues in the application form. There should be more structural information, also regarding good practices given by the National Agencies and the program guide.

Role models are very important. Students with for instance autism have almost no role models to see what Erasmus+ can do for them. This would be key in being more inclusive. Representation is key.

Is there a higher interest from male participants to take part into Erasmus job shadowing activities because are more practical?

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other gender identities?

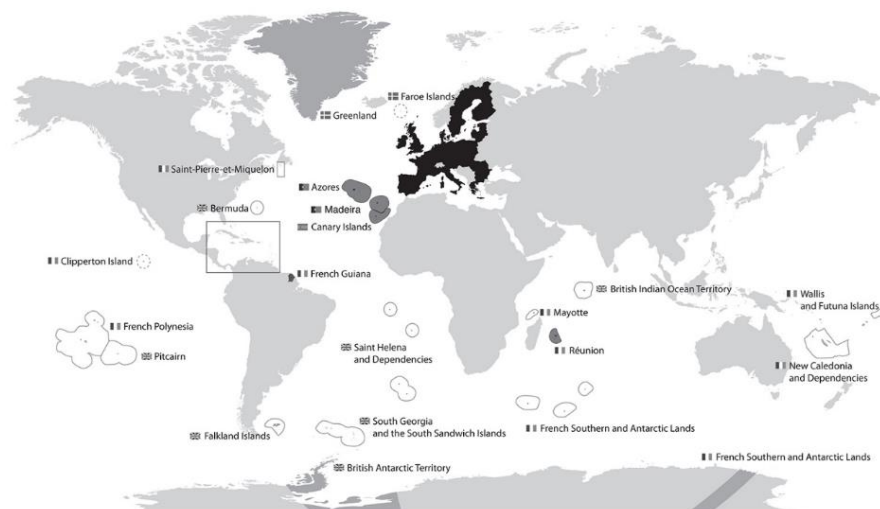
Discussion statement: The Erasmus programme needs to actively stimulate attitudinal and structural change (access to the labour market, enhance social mobility) for women (but also for non (cis)- male persons).

Europe and its colonial past

Background: While we predominantly think about the European Union as a benevolent European project, with cosmopolitan, progressive, and inclusive overtones, we overlook the past of colonialism and decolonization which is equally part of the process of European integration. In fact, the EEC of 1957 emerged also a response to the idea of safeguarding “Eurafrica”. It equally comes through in the idea of “Eurowhiteness” (the implicit idea of a “original” core to Europe, based on whiteness).

This largely neglected past represents itself however frequently, for instance in the various “woke” and “Black Lives Matter” movements throughout Europe, which are specifically about justice for “postcolonial citizens” or people with migration backgrounds from the Global South.

Reflections: What do we know about the participation of people with identities tied to the colonial past of Europe (or with a migration background generally) in international mobility? What do we know about equality of opportunity? And what do we know about their experiences?



Source: Kochenov 2011.

To what extent should the Erasmus+ programme raise awareness of the colonial past, in particular as a part of the pan-European project?

To what extent is this colonial past part of discussions about European identity? How could Erasmus+ contribute to a more inclusive European identity and the strengthening of sensibility around issues of decolonization and the evident political presence of Europe to this day beyond its own borders?

Discussion statement: Erasmus projects should aim to bring awareness of Europe's colonial past, and its long-term effects that continue until today.

Group discussions – Europe and its colonial past

Key remarks

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Mobility for students from North Africa is difficult, due to inter alia visa, bureaucratic challenges, and discrimination regarding religion. Furthermore, such students often have a cultural shock; the impact of this shock depends on where they come from, but they may not have support to realize it and face it.

Erasmus+ should aim to bring awareness of the past and the long-term effects that continue until today.

There are schools that have projects focused on the past and how to be learning from it. Cultural heritage is important to learn from nowadays. Why does the world look the way it does today? What can we learn from this?

It is important to have projects focusing on the past and discuss the more difficult topics because we need to know where we are coming from to understand the world we live in today. Heritage and experiences are key in education.

It is important to understand the culture and the past of a country so as to better understand the people. This is also inclusion, being open to other cultures. History is part of a country, of a person, of a culture.

European Countries should try to contact ex-colonial countries to collaborate with them. Europe needs to build collaboration with these countries. Erasmus must bring awareness about these topics. Erasmus can bring awareness to these topics starting even from the primary school and we have to start also now, in this room.

In Erasmus, there are cooperation partnerships with non-European institutions (such as Turkish schools), which are highly motivated in joining the Programme.

There is a lack of information about Erasmus+ and its activities among immigrants, and that prevents them from joining the Programme. Erasmus+ is perceived as too elitarian and addressed to a minority of “white” EU people.

An increasing number of Erasmus opportunities for minority groups should overcome the discrepancy between the daily work and the idealistic vision of the EU.

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The East-West distinction

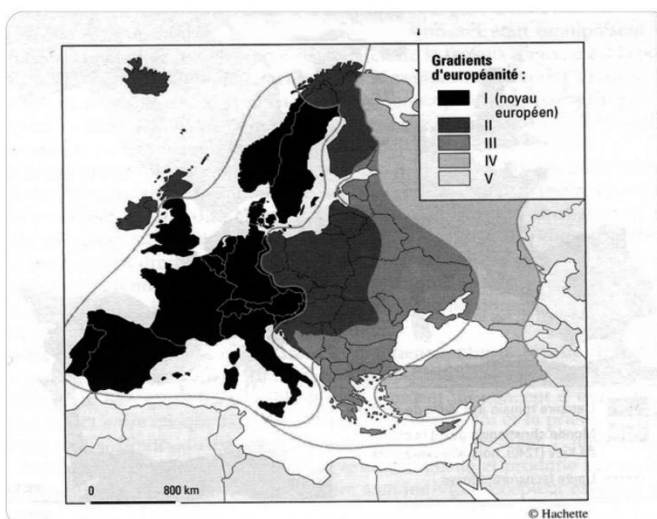
Background: The EU enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe has united the continent, but arguably there are still major differences between East and West today.

This includes tensions between a “core Europe” and the peripheries. It relates to deeply embedded mentalities and prejudices which tend to represent the East as backwards, backsliding, and generally as different and less developed.

There seem to be still major differences in Eastern and Western European locations, in particular in terms of the former lack of attraction for mobile students.

Students from Eastern Europe may tend to be mobile not just for reasons of curiosity or interest in other cultures, but also out of sheer necessity. There are no opportunities in their countries.

Eastern European students may face forms of discriminating treatment on mobility more than those from Western Europe.



Source: Böröcz 2020: 1127.

Reflections: To what extent does the Erasmus+ programme emphasize and contribute to an overarching European identity that explicitly includes East and Central Europe?

Should participants from Western Europe be more actively encouraged to take exchanges in East and Central Europe? Should East and Central European institutions become more central to the programme?

What is the relation of the Erasmus+ programme to a “brain drain” within the EU?

Discussion statement: The Erasmus+ programme (unwillingly) contributes to imbalances between the West and East.

Group discussions – East-West distinction

Key remarks

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Many students from Eastern countries go to Western countries even if life there is really expensive for them. But budget reasons can be a good reason to encourage students to go there.

Also universities are encouraging students to go to Western countries because it is better for their graduation (some universities are more prestigious than others).

Onje might create more partnerships among Eastern and Western schools, universities, and companies.

There is a general perception that there are “better” institutions in Central and Western Europe. Sometimes students spending their Erasmus mobility in Eastern EU countries have high expectations and focuses on the lack of services and infrastructures of the host country rather than the experience itself.

Even if there is a consistent group of Western students that spend their Erasmus in Eastern Europe, the number of Eastern students that decides to move to Western countries after their Erasmus mobility is growing faster. A similar tendency is growing from the South to the North of Europe with a consequent “brain drain”.

National governments of Eastern and Southern EU countries should value Erasmus+ experiences in job selections and adopt incentives for those Erasmus students that want to come back in their home countries after their mobility.

The programme causes imbalances even during the mobilities, some participants can afford to stay and live in the country where there are in mobility. Romanian in Sweden weren't able to pay and live in Malmo for budget constraints. Erasmus programme should face this problem with an extra budget for the people in mobilities that are coming from poorer countries.

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Section 3

“Train the trainers”

The training included brief introductions to specific topics and subsequent deliberative, group discussions – amongst different people involved in the Erasmus+ programme, such as students, Ambassadors, staff from National Agencies, members of the Erasmus Student Network, teachers and educators). The three themes were:

- youth political and civic engagement;
- European citizenship education;
- social inclusion, diversity, non-discrimination.

The participants discussed the main thesis, and subsequently the sub questions. A list of action items was provided (see below) that was used by the table facilitator to aid the discussion.



A group deliberation in Malmö, Sweden.

The key objectives of the training are:

- Give people a short background and deeper knowledge with regard to civic and political themes in international mobility/Erasmus+ (*knowledge*).
- Help to raise awareness of the multiple civic and political dimensions of the Erasmus+ programme (*awareness*).
- Help develop a critical-constructive view, where participants (alumni, staff, ambassadors) reflect on how they could (also collectively) contribute to further strengthening the civic and political learning effects of international mobility (*critical-reflexive mindset*).
- Help to think how participation and collaboration are about finding harmony and consensus but equally involve agreeing to disagree and dealing with ambiguity (*learning to participate*).

Theme 1. Civic and political engagement of youth

a. General facts: youth participation

Young people generally participate less in domestic and European politics. For instance, abstention of the youngest voters in European parliamentary elections is particularly high (over 70%). Young people seem less and less inclined in interacting with institutional politics, and the gap between the younger and older generation is widening. With the upcoming European parliamentary elections in May 2024, this is a major concern. The less young people participate, the less they are represented in politics, and the less governments and European institutions have incentives to create policies that explicitly address the youth's concerns. One "fun fact" is that only around 2 % of parliaments have members that are younger than 30 years old.

Important questions emerge: are public spheres and the media sufficiently attuned to young people's needs and interests? Can young people sufficiently contribute to public debate? Are young people developing different, novel relations to politics and the public good, and are they socialized politically in a different way? Are young people exposed sufficiently to education that helps them learning to participate, develop a civic and political consciousness, and transmit core civic and political skills?

b. Reflections:

- International mobility could play a more important role in stimulating the interest of youth in politics as well as in make evident the importance of their civic and political engagement.
- International mobility brings youth into contact with other societies and their problems and may raise awareness of the relevance of the European dimension to democratic politics.
- Experience with international mobility also brings out the difficulties of international collaboration and integration, in terms of different norms and cultural understandings, bureaucratic obstacles, difficulties in intercultural communication etc.

c. Thesis/discussion topic:

The Erasmus+ programme is focussed on improving educational and employment opportunities. In addition, it should strengthen dimensions of promotion of European values, skills of democratic engagement and civic participation.

d. Subquestions

- What are your personal experiences with regard to political topics and skills in the context of the Erasmus+ programme? Could you name positive as well as negative experiences?
- How much do institutions (schools, universities, organizations) pay attention to the civic and political dimensions of international mobility? If they do, how do they do this?
- How are political skills enhanced/trained (e.g. debating skills, dealing with conflict, *audi alteram partem*/learn-to-listen) in international programmes?
- Do experiences in international mobility have sufficient room for civic and political issues to be discussed? In other words, are there key moments in which politics and problems with political dimensions are discussed (very straightforward issues such as housing come to mind, but we can also think of how much voice do participants have in how the curricula are shaped or how much freedom do they have in choosing topics/subjects)?
- Erasmus+ is clearly about promoting the European integration project and a European awareness. Should such an awareness not also

include engagement with difficult topics, such as war, economic crisis, or the migration crisis (as key problems the EU needs to deal with)?

- To what extent is Erasmus+ a vehicle for making young people aware of their concerns and helping them to deal with these concerns?
- When is politics important? Did you ever experience major tensions or disputes between groups of students or between participants?

e. Actions (potential)

- Strengthening students' and or other pan-European networks.
- Create digital platforms that allow for interaction over time.
- Create moments/events in international mobility to collectively reflect on the future of Europe.
- Create moments/events to collectively reflect on difficulties of mobility and European citizenship.
- Reflect on exclusionary dimensions with international mobility.
- How can those with a mobility experience help to mobilize young people back home?
- Is civil society with civic and political missions collaborating?
- Young people can be brought closer to politics by discussing themes of interest: environment (the EU's Green Deal), youth employment and social mobility, migration, artificial intelligence.



A group deliberation in Malmö, Sweden.

Group discussions – Civic/political engagement of youth

Key remarks

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The Erasmus+ programme could raise awareness on the positive aspects of being European; in any mobility you should be prepared/informed about some aspects of the civic engagement in Europe.

The Erasmus+ programme could further develop a network of young Ambassadors (in Malmo, there was for instance a group of young Romanian ambassadors that took part in the conference). They could witness their democratic experiences in their life and propose social engagement in their territories. A strict connection with the territories should be encouraged, in order to see the local problems, judge the issues and act for a stronger participation into democratic life (Service Learning).

A “Democracy Ambassador” could aim at: getting youth involved in elections; reaching out to people who will vote for the first time (target groups: youth & immigrants); this framework could work for general political engagement too.

Younger and older generations could exchange memory and historical experiences.

Even if people understand the value of the EU in general (especially when talking with non-EU citizens), the EU system is complex and it needs a lot of effort to educate yourself/ other people.

We need to give students the skills to present and discuss in public, they have to learn how to be heard. It's a practical point of view. Young citizens also need to learn how to build a network and how to participate.

Why do young people not go to vote? The fact that they do not vote says more about adults than about young people themselves: they need to know how to participate, maybe a platform designed to teach them how to participate. It takes a village to raise a child, it takes an entire community to grow a citizen.

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Theme 2. European citizenship education

a. General facts

The knowledge of EU institutions of young people (Under30) is uneven across the EU. An EP Youth Survey found that in some countries (e.g. Croatia), only 25 % of the respondents thought to understand a great deal or fair amount about the EU. In others, such as the Netherlands or Belgium, this increases to 31/2 %, while in Portugal 63 % claimed to have fair knowledge. Also, there are differences in male and female responses, the former more confident in their knowledge. A majority of respondents thought not to have influence over important decisions, laws, and policies affecting the EU as a whole.

Beyond factual knowledge about European integration as such, it remains unclear how European core values and policy objectives (such as inclusion, recognition of cultural diversity, minority rights, tolerance, respect for the rule of law) are actually promoted through European policies. This includes the Erasmus+ Programme. A robust form of European citizenship education would need to go beyond a type of “banal cosmopolitanism” that consists in an general, rather superficial intercultural exchange about for instance culturally diverse food, drinks, typical habits and musical taste. European citizenship education needs to involve the development of civic and political skills, which includes as significant subjective dimension. Thus, citizenship education needs to expand factual knowledge, but also to develop skills in terms of “learning to participate”, dealing with ambiguity, change, and conflict, debating sensitive matters in public, engaging somehow with “taboos”, and discussing dimensions of European integration that do not seem to work. At the same time, this means that European citizenship education ought not to be political in ideological terms, but rather construct a platform and relationships that allow for open debate.

b. Reflections:

- European citizenship and European civic education are not sufficiently developed, remain scattered and fragmented between member states.
- Young people have insufficient knowledge of the EU.
- Internationally mobile students would be expected to be more knowledgeable about the EU, but they are hardly so.
- International mobility does not in and by itself strengthen European citizenship.

- Inter-thematic teaching of citizenship through other courses does not work
- EU citizenship education should not be just “celebratory”, but should facilitate critical reflection, also on the EU’s past, making EU citizenship an open, inclusionary concept and create competencies in dealing with conflict and difficult legacies from the past (e.g. colonialism).

c. Thesis:

The lack of youth participation in European politics calls for a comprehensive development of a *European citizenship education* as a core and obligatory part of the Erasmus+ programme.

d. Subquestions

- How are European citizenship, skills and knowledge currently being addressed in the programme/by your institution? Are there sufficient moments for critical reflection and debate? How are European citizenship skills and training being evaluated?
- How can the Erasmus experience stimulate sentiments of civic responsibility? To what extent are exchange programmes making participants aware of existing societal problems in the host country? To what extent does international mobility help developing awareness of the importance of common, European solutions?
- To what extent are the trends of democracy and rule of law erosion object of debate in study programmes?
- Is (or should) all Erasmus+ participants engage in (short) courses on European integration?
- Is their comprehensive attention in international mobility (including in lifelong learning) for developing core skills of digital citizenship and in relation to the impact of Artificial Intelligence on democracy and society at large?
- How much attention is there in programmes for civic capacities to identify fake news and disinformation, select trustworthy information, and use such information in argumentation?
- How aware are participants of current processes of reform of the EU Treaties, the EU’s Green Deal, upcoming European Parliament

elections, or new ways of participating in EU politics (e.g. European Citizens' Panels)?

- How much collaboration is there between partner institutions with regard to European citizenship education? Could you mention positive (and negative) experiences in this regard?
- To what extent are current programmes and institutions stimulating critical thinking, media literacy, and generally fostering "thinking out of the box"? What do these dimensions mean in practice, do you think (e.g. how can one stimulate critical thinking)?

e. Actions (potential)

- EU education must become a mandatory topic, in order to emphasize the importance of integration as well as of international mobility, and to reduce prejudices.
- Allocating a specific budget to develop educational programmes on the functioning of the EU and its values that it could propose to the Member States that wish, so that they can integrate them into their curricula (primary, secondary schools, and universities) (proposal 22.4 Conference on the Future of Europe).
- Introduce short information events on the upcoming European Parliament elections, helping (young) people to orient in voting.
- Citizenship education is often contested due ideological conflicts and forms of polarization. We need to think of a citizenship education that is stimulating participation but does not impose ideological standpoints.
- European citizenship education should contain an important environmental dimension, which helps raising environmental awareness. How can this be achieved in practical terms? Are there recommendations regarding international mobility that incentive travel by train for instance?
- Specific "democracy ambassadors" could be created to incentivize interest in the civic and political dimensions of the Erasmus+ programme.

Group discussions – European citizenship education

Key remarks

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We should not ask why young people are not actively interested, we have to involve them. The structure of Erasmus must be more addressed to include everyone, especially the students who are more in need to do this kind of activities, not only who is already willing to participate.

A lack of knowledge of the EU might be a bigger problem in smaller towns than in bigger cities.

In France, young people seem not to trust the EU; people feel they do not have a say in (European) politics.

Erasmus+ mobility is about a community and you get easier linked to the EU or feel like an “EU member”.

If you never have been in an international context, it might be difficult to engage with your “EU citizenship”.

It is important to involve the students’/pupils’ families in the debate around active participations to democratic life, by organizing parents’ days and grandparents’ days at school.

The creation of Youth Parliaments in schools could be a form of increasing deliberative decisions concerning school life (homework, free time, different forms of representation). The Youth Parliaments should be held by volunteer students.

Young people think that simple information on EU matters is often difficult to find, the EU should spread information in a “sexy” way (i.e. with Tik Tok).

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Theme 3. Social inclusion, diversity, non-discrimination

a. General facts:

The Erasmus+ programme pays attention to two types of inclusion: 1) making the mobility programme itself more inclusive by targeting “people with fewer opportunities” and 2) by stressing the importance for inclusion in society at large. “Fewer opportunities” involve among others *social obstacles or barriers* due to discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or disability. This may also refer to limited social competences or skills, high-risk behaviour or forms of social marginalisation. Barriers may involve *economic barriers*, or *educational barriers*, and *cultural differences*. A further barrier may be *geographical barriers*. The various barriers, when coming together, may form intersectional disadvantages, that is, people suffer from various, accumulative obstacles to participate in mobility.

Such barriers are difficult to study and gathering information is in part ethically sensitive. We hence know relatively little about both the inclusiveness of international mobility, nor about how it may contribute to broader social inclusion.

The recent SiEM project of the ESN (2021) has conducted a very valuable survey on inclusion, which found, among the ca. 12.000 students surveyed, that 24% of the participants experienced some form of discrimination while abroad on a mobility programme. Also, almost a third of the respondents from an ethnic minority background reported experiencing discrimination, while only 3% percent of while respondents reported discrimination in relation to race, ethnicity or nationality.

b. Reflections:

- We currently know little of the diversity of Erasmus participants in terms of ethnic/migrant background.
- We know relatively little about specific “less advantaged groups” in international mobility.
- The notion of “fewer opportunities” remains rather vague; what does this mean on the ground?
- How can we deal better with the phenomenon of intersectionality?

- A core focus on barriers – rightly so - is the dimension of financial concerns as a major barrier for people to become internationally mobile. How does this barrier relate to other barriers?
- Are there major differences across Europe (East-West; North – South) in terms of how institutions deal with diversity, gender, ethnicity/nationality, and lesser opportunities?
- The Erasmus+ programme might be counter-productive with regard to reaching the most difficult groups (those that live in peripheral areas, have socio-economic problems, come from poorer backgrounds). In other words, the “high achievers” are specifically incentivized, while the less mobile are left further behind.

c. Thesis:

The Erasmus+ programme does not pay sufficient attention to structural forms of exclusion, particularly in the form of intersectional exclusion (different obstacles/barriers experienced by the same person).

d. Subquestions

- How can we best define “fewer opportunities”, that is, what do such barriers consist of in the Erasmus+ programme?
- Do Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and other institutions help to create “safe spaces” for participants? How do they do this?
- How can the wide range of “fewer opportunities” be dealt with on the ground?
- Are there major differences across Europe (East-West; North – South) in terms of how institutions deal with diversity, gender, ethnicity/nationality, and lesser opportunities?
- Is there specific attention for religious identity in international mobility programmes?
- Is there specific attention for disability in international mobility programmes?
- Is there specific attention for gender identity in international mobility programmes?
- Is there specific attention for ethno-cultural identity in international mobility programmes?
- How can we deal better with the phenomenon of intersectionality (that is, people suffering from various barriers at the same time)?

- Is the absence of specifically targeted policies for people with lesser opportunities an important reason for people not engaging in mobility?
- To what extent is the curriculum at HEIs paying attention to lack of opportunities and forms of potential discrimination?

e. Actions (potential)

- Host institutions need to develop their own targeted policy – a Diversity and Inclusion Strategy - for more vulnerable and underrepresented groups that require additional support.
- National Agencies have to develop specific inclusion strategies for underrepresented groups.
- Specific mobility programmes need to be developed for target groups.
- Institutional strategies need to become much more informed about forms of discrimination in and barriers to mobility.
- A structural “reach out” programme for groups with “least opportunities” need to be developed and financed.
- Student organisations need to develop specific strategies for support for underrepresented/vulnerable groups.



Group deliberations in Malmö, Sweden.

Group discussions – European citizenship education

Key remarks

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In the adult sector, less privileged learners are identified, selected among the ones who have never been abroad or are coming from other, non-EU countries. The project is an opportunity for transformation/change, after the mobility they can work together and are happier. Opportunities should be expanded to people who do not have opportunities, between 18-80 years old, secondary education for those who drop out or who have a diploma in other countries).

The Erasmus programme should reserve a percentage of the number of the grants to people with special needs, socio-economical issues and linguistic problems (dyslexic and so on).

It is important to include minority groups into mobilities abroad and into the Erasmus ambassadors' network. Travelling for study or training is a form of active participation in European democratic life. Mobilities are occasions to learn something new with a practical approach and students appreciate a learning by doing methodology in their education.

The Erasmus programme does not pay enough attention to social inclusion and as a result not all the schools involve marginalized students in Erasmus activities. Each organization involved in Erasmus+ projects should do an analysis of the minority groups inside their institution and of the minority groups' needs, in order to apply for specific activities addressed to the active participation of these groups.

Many students find the Erasmus+ application forms' language too difficult to understand and this prevents them from applying. Many students are disillusioned and frustrated because the project selection is too hard. Since in many countries EU funds cannot cover the number of applications there should be more synergies of funds at EU, national and regional levels.

It is difficult to discuss these topics, when people with fewer opportunities are not here; their voice is not heard; it is missing in a discussion like this; diversity is lacking amongst the participants.

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Florence/Italy, January 2024

