



# RECOMMENDATIONS ON LEARNING MOBILITY

## INSIGHTS FROM THE DIGITAL DASHBOARD





## *Abstract*

*This report is part of the project Digital Ecosystem for E-Participation Linking Youth (henceforth DEEP-linking Youth), co-funded by the European Commission, and contains findings from the DEEP-Linking Youth Digital Dashboard. The insights were gained over a one-year monitoring period of social media content relating to learning mobility programmes from all key social media platforms originating from all of the countries eligible to participate in the Erasmus programme.*

*Through the monitoring of the Digital Dashboard, we have extracted insights on certain aspects of learning mobility programmes to provide recommendations and to improve EU policies regarding youth mobility. This is feedback based on the observation of real social media messages where we think the learning mobility programmes, especially Erasmus, could be improved or where further investigation is needed.*

*The Digital Dashboard remains a resource for policy-makers who wish to extract data about learning mobility programmes and youth mobility in the EU.*



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## Introduction

This report is part of the project *Digital Ecosystem for EParticipation Linking Youth* (henceforth *DEEP-linking Youth*), co-funded by the European Commission.

The aim of the project is to explore how e-participation can foster young people's empowerment and active participation in democratic life. The project will test the functioning of a digital ecosystem for youth engagement by bridging technology and young citizens on a common task with the aim to provide quality input to decision-making in view of producing a sustainable impact.

One of the main goals of the DEEP-linking Youth project was to understand how to take into consideration and include the voices of the young people who do not engage in decision-making processes.

For this reason, we created an online monitoring platform that can capture young people's insights for policy-making purposes, the so-called '**Digital Dashboard**'. The objective was to assess what young people think and express online about youth mobility in the EU, including about the Erasmus programme. Mainly, we looked at what challenges young people have voiced online regarding studying, working, and volunteering abroad, and, more importantly, what solutions to these problems can be considered.

This paper is structured in the following way. First, we outline the challenges to youth mobility that have been identified through research conducted by Erasmus Students Network (ESN) and two activities we have implemented throughout the project: Boot Camps and a Live Chat.

Second, we look at the challenges that have been identified through the monitoring of the Digital Dashboard and what insights it can give policy-makers.

The final recommendations will focus on how to improve learning mobility programmes for young people in Europe.

# 1. The Challenges of Youth Mobility in the EU

Before and after the creation of the Digital Dashboard, we conducted parallel activities in order to identify the challenges of learning mobility programmes and youth mobility in Europe, mainly:

- Research through ESN
- Boot Camps in Hungary and Croatia
- Live Chats with MEPs

In the following paragraphs, we will briefly describe the outcomes of the research and the activities to list the main concerns around EU youth mobility.

## 1.1 ESN Surveys

Each year, ESN produces a survey<sup>1</sup>, in which a large number of students (up to 25,000) give their input on certain topics related to their mobility experience. Among many other things, these have shown that:

1. The biggest obstacle to student mobility is *financial means* to bear the cost of the mobility. This came out of the ESN Surveys in 2010, 2014 and 2015.
2. A *lack of information* about the different aspects of mobility and lack of recognition of the classes taken abroad are the other 2 criteria that came out of our recent research.

The Key Results of the ESN Survey 2014 that focused specifically on obstacles to mobility were:

- Financial issues and personal ties are still major obstacles for students to become mobile. However, a lack of information, fear of recognition problems, long bureaucratic procedures, doubts about the quality of studies abroad or the fear of prolonged studies still play a role in the minds of potential students.
- More than 57% of non-mobile students consider financial issues to be the most important obstacle to mobility.

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<sup>1</sup> The surveys can be found at <https://esn.org/ESNSurvey>.

### 1.1.1 From HousErasmus+

In the Digital Dashboard (explained further in this document), one of the sub-topics we looked at was *housing* for Erasmus students. In 2017, ESN conducted a big research report<sup>2</sup> on the topic, carried out under the project HousErasmus+ (<http://houserasmus.eu/>).

The HousErasmus+ research showed that:

1. Housing is the biggest expense when going abroad, except in exceptional situations where there are very high tuition fees at learning institutions.
2. Housing is a big challenge to short term mobility as students, trainees or professors staying only a few months do not fit market preferences and have a demand that goes against the interests of landlords.
3. The Erasmus grant does not cater for the actual cost of living in most of the places students go to study. The lack of availability of an additional grant opportunity for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds makes participation in the Erasmus programme socially determined. There needs to be a real effort put into opening up the programme to VET students, and to all participants in the Erasmus programme, by giving a proper chance to poor young people to be supported in a fair manner.
4. Erasmus+ Internships and international internships in general are completely absent from all Erasmus support mechanisms. Companies are given a fraction of the requirements universities have to follow and students are therefore left alone to figure out a challenging situation, creating a social bias in to participation in the programme.

## 1.2 The Boot Camps

One of the activities of the DEEP-linking Youth project were the Boot Camps organised in Hungary and Croatia. In these Boot Camps, there were also many varied discussions about various parts of the Erasmus Programme and how the perceived problems can be solved<sup>3</sup>.

The young participants brought up many different problems related to the programme. Some were very general, like concerns about living in another country, but some were rather concrete:

- Lack of choices for different universities and/or receiving countries;
- Accommodation issues;
- Financial issues;
- Linguistic problems;
- Lack of information about the programme.

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<sup>2</sup> The full report is available at [http://houserasmus.eu/sites/default/files/20170927\\_HE%2B\\_FinalReport.pdf](http://houserasmus.eu/sites/default/files/20170927_HE%2B_FinalReport.pdf). A shorter document with policy recommendation is available at [http://houserasmus.eu/sites/default/files/20170907\\_HE%2B\\_Recommendations\\_booklet\\_digital\\_pages.pdf](http://houserasmus.eu/sites/default/files/20170907_HE%2B_Recommendations_booklet_digital_pages.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> As can be seen in the link above, there were also other topics covered at the Boot Camps, but this section will focus on the Erasmus Programme.

When asked what improvements to the programme would convince them to take part in it, the majority agreed upon:

- A wider choice of receiving universities and countries;
- More information about the programme, and
- Greater economic support.

The choice of universities/countries is rather complicated to solve because inter-institutional agreements are made at university level, sometimes even at faculty/department level, and it is unlikely that an EU-wide solution will be found to this problem.

Information and greater support, however, is certainly something which can be dealt with by policy-makers who want to make a positive change. Individual support for students is indeed rather low. To take a rather obvious example, while a student from Norway going to Bulgaria will most likely find sufficient finance, the opposite is very far from being true and an increase in support for individuals might push more students to take the step.

The students who had already taken part in an Erasmus exchange were also invited to suggest improvements to the Programme. Several of them mentioned improving the financial support available (similar to what the non-Erasmus students said), but they also mentioned bureaucratic procedures as an annoying obstacle.

### 1.3 Live Chats

A live chat between young people and Brando Benifei MEP (S&D, Italy) was organised by the DEEP-linking Youth partners on 12 July 2017. The chat was set up on Facebook and participants who had questions related to Erasmus or to youth participation were welcome to ask their questions on the chat's event wall. This could be done both in advance and during the chat.

Before the chat started, we had a short interview<sup>4</sup> with Mr Benifei to ask him about his own views on youth democratic participation, digital participation and the Erasmus Programme.

During the live chat, there was a great variety among the participants and their questions. Participants expressed concerns over the funds available and, related to that, the lack of participants from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A participant wrote: *"From what I experience, many of my friends still see Erasmus as an elitist opportunity, which is of course a pity as the program aims to be as inclusive as possible. How could the Erasmus program become more accessible to people from a socio-economic vulnerable background?"*

One disabled former EVS participant shared his positive experience but still recognised that the lack of experience and information meant he missed many opportunities, hence he asked how to make mobility programmes more inclusive.

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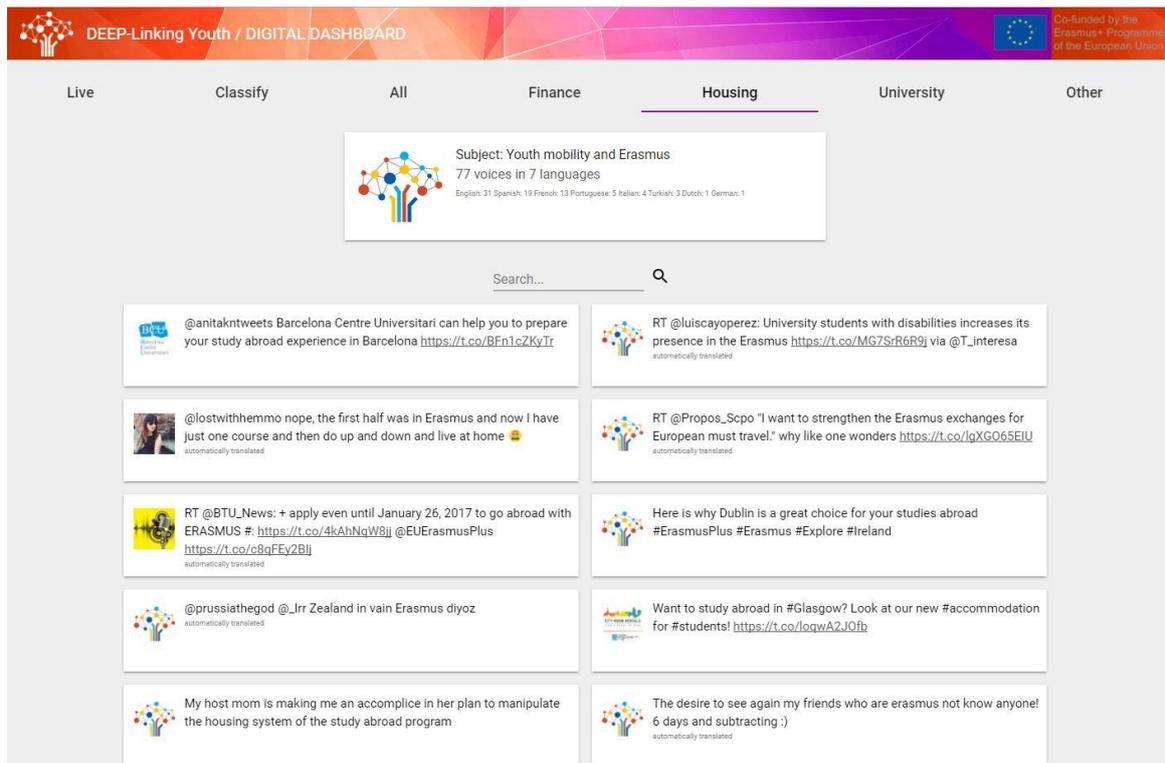
<sup>4</sup> This interview can be seen at <https://is.gd/y4rMC9>.

Another topic discussed online was the burdensome paperwork related to Erasmus exchanges. One participant said that *“the lack of standardized platform makes all the confirmations worse, because I'm supposed to print out up to 6 copies of documents and to coordinate everything myself, even if I cannot be in the chosen destination in the same time”* and Mr Benifei replied that there are ongoing projects working on digitising the procedures.

Several participants also asked about Brexit and the status of non-Programme Countries.

## 2. Findings from the Digital Dashboard

After identifying the challenges of youth mobility through research and parallel activities, one of the highlights of the project was the creation of the so-called **Digital Dashboard**<sup>5</sup>: a platform that scans a wide range of social media, mainly Twitter, and monitors what people voice about youth mobility in the EU.



The screenshot displays the DEEP-Linking Youth / DIGITAL DASHBOARD interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with tabs for 'Live', 'Classify', 'All', 'Finance', 'Housing' (selected), 'University', and 'Other'. A central box indicates the search subject: 'Subject: Youth mobility and Erasmus' with '77 voices in 7 languages' and a breakdown of languages: English: 31, Spanish: 19, French: 13, Portuguese: 5, Italian: 4, Turkish: 3, Dutch: 1, German: 1. Below this is a search bar with a magnifying glass icon. The main content area shows a grid of tweets. The first tweet is from @anitaktweets about Barcelona Centre Universitari. The second is a retweet from @luiscayoperez about university students with disabilities. The third is a retweet from @Propos\_Scipo about strengthening Erasmus exchanges. The fourth is from @BTU\_News about applying for Erasmus until January 26, 2017. The fifth is from @prussiathegod about Erasmus in Zeeland. The sixth is from Erasmus+ about accommodation in Glasgow. The seventh is a personal tweet about a host mom's plan to manipulate the housing system. The eighth is about missing friends during the Erasmus program.

After identifying all the challenges related to youth mobility mentioned in the previous chapter, including the most recent Erasmus Impact Study Regional Analysis<sup>6</sup> from 2016, we selected the key themes that could be categorised for the purposes of the Digital Dashboard:

- FINANCE:** costs and affordability
- HOUSING:** accommodation issues
- UNIVERSITY:** administration and bureaucracy, classes, credits, etc.
- OTHER:** general problems not classified by the above, such as social issues (family, language barriers, etc.) and cultural issues (religion, lifestyle and legal issues)

In the following paragraphs, we will present a series of selected opinions highlighted through the monitoring process and the insights that could be harvested for policy-makers.

<sup>5</sup> <https://deep-y.vpri.org/>, More information on the DEEP-linking Youth E-Participation Guidelines

<sup>6</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/study/2016/erasmus-impact\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/library/study/2016/erasmus-impact_en.pdf)

## 2.1 Insights on Finance, Housing, University and Other issues

The Dashboard features a ‘search’ facility that allowed us to drill down into certain topics based on keyword filtering. We have used this feature to compare feedback from the social web with the findings of the ESN annual report below.

### 2.1.1 Finance: Grants, Money and Costs

There is a large amount of sentiment that the value of grants is low compared to the cost of the experience. This was in keeping with ESN findings:

Verbatim comments	Our thoughts
<i>“Good in any case should not rely on the Erasmus grant to live! “</i>	More can be done to set <i>expectations</i> of Erasmus students in terms of what the grant will realistically cover.
<i>“Erasmus is a bit like experiencing the lives of the poor”</i>	This experience can actually be harnessed. Perhaps working to a budget and living in hardship is a valuable life lesson?
<i>“As soon as I get a little money, I buy books; And when there is still something left, I buy food and clothing. D. “</i>	What are the student essentials?
<i>“Education is not public or grant opportunities, tell my mother how you spend what you earn in a year in an Erasmus”</i>	Despite the low grant levels, European citizens need to realise this is a privilege and not a right.
<i>“@thordisg I felt like I was a criminal when I founded the bank account for the Erasmus grant.”</i>	Students are clearly conscientious about their funding and very few seek to exploit it.
<i>“Something strange is giving back grants with tax “</i>	Is there a tax inequality with grants? Should Erasmus students become tax exempt in other areas of their living?
<i>“Erasmus grants are summarized in if you have money you go and if you do not already have a 10 you eat boogers”</i>	Many young people are still experiencing inequalities.
<i>“It is at the end of the semester and I FINALLY got my Erasmus grant. It is not a shame.”</i>	The timeliness of grant monies is often in question.
<i>“Instead of the money free train ticket”</i>	This could be a very good idea. Direct financing in the form of a grant could be partly exchanged for discounted commodities such as travel tickets.
<i>“Pouaah my stomach it supports more no food since I returned from erasmus or how it happens?”</i>	Could living in poverty create long term health conditions?

Regarding this category, there is a significant amount of content related to prospective Erasmus applicants seeking advice on destinations and universities. Clearly this is a difficult decision for young people and the opinions of those who have been through the scheme are valued.

Despite the grant tiers depending on your country of destination, cost is still a factor – particularly as the Erasmus grant is seen to only cover a minor fraction of student expenses and other costs are likely to be absorbed by parents.

Verbatim comments	Our thoughts
<i>"I have already spent a lot of money for this Erasmus and I have not yet started, in Sweden I will feel hungry I think"</i>	There are still perceived inequalities across Member States in terms of how much the Erasmus grant will support. How are cost of living calculations currently derived?
<i>"Go to Erasmus is a waste of time and money of your parents"</i>	Emphasises the reliance on family to support the process. Perhaps there should be a tax break for donors?
<i>"generation Erasmus with daddy's money"</i>	It is no secret than an Erasmus grant alone will not facilitate youth mobility.

### 2.1.2 Housing: Accommodation Concerns

There were, in general, few messages about accommodation, other than landlords promoting their rental units. Of the messages we intercepted about accommodation, most related to living standards and the dynamic of student living:

Verbatim comments	Our thoughts
<i>"Sharing room is definitely being the worst fucking Erasmus experience, and I think I fall short." "With as clean in this house, I of Erasmus I leave immunized to the bacteria."</i>	Student living standards can affect their experience and achievement. Perhaps there should be a transparent accommodation rating system, like TripAdvisor.
<i>"It is nothing new, but as I have experienced this year I will tell you that, if you can avoid sharing flat with Erasmus, do it. Are the worst."</i>	It would appear that non-Erasmus tenants are cautious about sharing with Erasmus students.
<i>"To share flat with some girls of Erasmus I smell that I am not going to give back the deposit that I have paid" "My house-mates are the typical ones who go to Erasmus parties. NOT ALL. But yes. That's life"</i>	The mix of personalities can give rise to tension. Perhaps student accommodation placements should be matched to personality types/traits.

### 2.1.3 University: Profiteering and Application Burden

There were, in general, few comments relating to problems at universities, but we occasionally uncovered general dissatisfaction:

*“And I complain about the university site here in Genoa The one in Lyon where I will go to Erasmus is the most useless site in history”*

Other frequent comments related to charging and profiteering:

Verbatim comments	Our thoughts
<p><i>“@FjerilShade Language facs with full of students Erasmus = profit”</i></p> <p><i>“Funny is that they tell me that the Erasmus offer them 1 month free of language courses and I get an email saying that they are 380 €”</i></p>	Investigation is needed to see if universities are profiteering from language barriers to expose the worst offenders.
<p><i>“If I had to go to Erasmus in Barcelona certainly I would not have problems with the meal times”</i></p>	There were concerns about being accepted and beliefs, languages and discrimination.
<p><i>“But what do you think uniovi charging 10 euros for each language you submit to the Erasmus test (some charging 60)”</i></p>	Investigation is needed to determine the impact of these charges, its implication and fairness.

Under this category, there were a number of posts relating to the application process – mainly suggesting that it is convoluted. There are also a number of posts relating to application deadlines:

Verbatim comments	Our thoughts
<p><i>“It's 2 days I miss to send the application form to Erasmus, I do not hurt anyone, no one who gives me a certainty”</i></p> <p><i>“When you find out that the application form for Erasmus expires on the day after tomorrow and you did not know anything. “</i></p> <p><i>“@mert_d_d @etlibrokoli Is it serious? Anyway, I forgot to make an application for Erasmus in the second year”</i></p>	A better system for deadline reminders is needed.
<p><i>“God does not test anyone with the Erasmus application process”</i></p> <p><i>“I'm going to erasmus as soon as I start the next course and I already feel overwhelmed”</i></p> <p><i>“I've been filling out the online application form for 3 days to get out of Erasmus because this is awful”</i></p> <p><i>“God does not test anyone with the Erasmus application process”</i></p>	Streamline the application process (back end and front end). Make it easier/simpler.
<p><i>“they encourage everyone to go on Erasmus but there's true that bilinguals who can. 20 places for 2000 students eh “</i></p>	Investigate the fairness of applications based on the language capabilities of applicants.

## 2.1.4 Others: General topics

Occasionally we found a number of general topics that challenged the theme of youth mobility:

Verbatim comments	Our thoughts
<i>"Get international students out of migration figures and save Erasmus"</i>	Are official migration figures being manipulated or misleading?
<i>"Never study abroad because eventually they'll make u leave!!!". "I want to tell her "my best advice is not to fall in love with someone in ERASMUS"</i>	Do you need to be mentally ready for Erasmus or take some sort of test? How can we make it easier for young European citizens to convert to residents?
<i>"You have to think internationally at an early age. More international, more inclusive and more effective"</i>	This is true and could be used as a hook for future youth mobility communications.
<i>"If any of you have left Erasmus and have been sent packages with your things, with what company has it been?"</i>	Should Erasmus organise some sort of commodity exchange or brokerage?

We also saw new ideas about Erasmus for older Europeans or for shorter durations.

### Orientation

We observed that posts relating to Erasmus experiences were generally positive, with a large volume of posts at the end of the scheme relating to the disappointment that students felt about having to leave.

However, there were also comments relating to the onset of study placements, particularly in terms of the effect on family life and relationships.

Verbatim comments	Our thoughts
<i>"If I had to go to Erasmus in Barcelona certainly I would not have problems with the meal times"</i>	There were various concerns about being accepted and beliefs, languages and discrimination.
<i>"Maria returns today from Erasmus, after 6 months without seeing her, finally !!" "I am happy because in two weeks returns my best friend of erasmus and I am like crazy to see it." "RT @little__giirl: It's so hard for me to know that they are going to Erasmus for the year, I'm going to feel lost in school without my godfather ahah"</i>	Erasmus has a wider community effect. Perhaps orientation should include family members and friends.
<i>"I return to the orientation week Y !!! Then I go back to Germany because the people in the erasmus group want to go to the oktober fest lmao" "RT @CarlaBlondeel: When I think back to my Erasmus travels I really want to go back"</i>	We suspect that long-lasting ties will be made with host countries.

## 2.2 Feedback for Policy-Makers – An Example

The Digital Dashboard has managed to reveal sentiments and concerns around learning mobility programmes in the EU. Young people are constantly voicing their opinions online, and although these views are not recommendations *per se*, they can still give important insights that decision-makers should take into consideration when developing policies.

Although the feed was not completely clean and noise came in a number of different guises, the monitoring process was much easier given the Dashboard translated all content into English and was refined based on our machine learning filter.

Throughout the project, we extracted a number of serious topics from the Dashboard and converted them into feedback and questions for policy-makers:

- It is natural that Erasmus students will sometimes want to stay in their host countries. How easy is it to convert to being a resident and how can the Erasmus experience be used positively in this respect?
- A number of students are dismayed at the amount of paperwork required by the Erasmus application process. Can anything be done to streamline this burden?
- Exchange students have a dilemma about what they should do with the possessions they have accumulated after an exchange. What can you do with your stuff when you leave?
- Erasmus can cause young people a lot of anxiety, particularly when there are cultural differences between home and host country. And when they come back, some report that they have post-Erasmus depression. What can be done to safeguard the mental health of those who take on this experience?
- Erasmus has been described as “White, affluent, city”. What is the EU doing to monitor equalities and promote exchanges in more rural settings?
- Travel costs between home and university are significant for Erasmus students. Do you think Erasmus grants should factor this in? What is stopping the EU from being more generous?
- We’ve heard a lot about fair charging for European mobile phone operators, but what is being done to ensure that students can benefit from financial reciprocity, such as the ability to access and use their home bank accounts free of charge while on placement?
- Do you think the Erasmus programme will be affected by Brexit and, if so, how?

## 3. Recommendations

The different parts of the project and the insights from the Digital Dashboard have identified various challenges related to the learning mobility, mainly the Erasmus Programme. In this chapter, we present several recommendations that EU policy-makers could work on in order to achieve a substantial improvement learning mobility programmes, especially in view of the next revision of the Erasmus programme.

### 3.1 Financial Support

A lack of sufficient financial support from the Erasmus Programme was evident in many parts of the project. Studying abroad carries with it extra costs that are only partly compensated for by the scholarship. Certainly, regional differences play a huge part here. Here are two obvious examples. A student in Romania who goes on an Erasmus exchange to Norway will have a huge increase in living costs. On the other hand, a student from Norway who goes to study in Romania, will most likely be rather well off with the Erasmus scholarship.

There is a high probability that students will need to 'top-up' their grants themselves and, consequently, the cost of Erasmus does vary by Member State, independent of variations in the official grant to reflect the differences in the cost of living.

The lack of financial support has a seemingly easy solution: simply increase the grants. This, however, depends of course on a number of other factors, including the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and the annual budget. However, even within the existing budget, there might be a possibility to:

- Further increase the difference in the scholarships depending on destination country (or destination region, or city...).
- Increase the support available, in particular for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Educate students about the true and comparative cost of their studies across the various choices.
- Look at more enhanced options around means testing.
- Do more to understand the effects of low incomes on students in the scheme. For example, does it affect their wellbeing /results or is it actually a good lesson in how to budget?
- Look at forms of non-financial support (e.g. the provision of limited but free pan-European travel or tax breaks).

## 3.2 Housing

As mentioned above, some students expressed worries about the lack of accommodation abroad in their new host cities. Through research done in another Erasmus+-funded project, HousErasmus+ (<http://houserasmus.eu/>) we have found that to tackle accommodation challenges for international students and trainees, we must:

- Draw up more precise guidelines on accommodation for students linked to the Erasmus+ programme (especially in the Erasmus Charter on Higher Education)
- Bring the topic of housing as a higher priority in the DG EAC and National Agencies of Erasmus+
- Overhaul national legislation that might make it impossible to bring innovative solutions to this field (sub-renting, short stays, universities not allowed to own buildings, etc.)
- Create a framework for all of the stakeholders to meet regularly and address the problem.
- Ensure proper provision of information about mobility, its opportunities and challenges.
- Have a stronger approach to fighting frauds to which international students are particularly vulnerable.
- Quality Assurance benchmarks for housing international students should be created by a collaboration of the stakeholders in the field.
- Public and private investment in student housing is necessary to provide affordable and inclusive mobility opportunities to all. Tax incentives and subsidies should be made available as well.
- Make European funding available for the construction of student housing
- Ensure international trainees can benefit from the same support international students have
- Provide templates for rental contracts in English and the local language.
- Create public ratings/feedback and standards for landlords providing student accommodation
- Look at schemes for housing students with similar tastes together (e.g. “quiet” houses).

### 3.3 University:

#### 3.3.1 Application Process

The paperwork relating to Erasmus exchanges is infamous. Learning Agreements, Inter-Institutional Agreements, Transcripts of Records and other parts are kept in paper copies and are signed and transferred by post between different universities. This did not come across as the biggest issue throughout the project, but it was mentioned in several tweets from the Digital Dashboard and, as pointed out above, it was also noted by a participant in the live chat with Brando Benifei. In a survey from 2016<sup>7</sup>, almost 90% of universities considered the workload surrounding the management of Erasmus+ exchanges “very high” or “high”. There are several ongoing projects in which various processes of the Erasmus exchanges are being digitised in one way or another. Notable examples are Erasmus Without Paper (<https://www.erasmuswithoutpaper.eu>), Online Learning Agreement (<https://learning-agreement.eu>), the Erasmus+ App (<http://erasmusapp.eu/>) and, not only related to exchanges but rather to European education digitisation in general, the European Student Card project (<http://europeanstudentcard.eu/>).

The recommendations here would be to:

- Keep promoting the above-mentioned projects at European level.
- Encourage all universities to use the above-mentioned projects.
- Improve the process or reminders during the process, e.g. deadlines for submitting an application
- Look at how the application process can be simplified or streamlined
- Report independently on the fairness of the process, such as on the success rates versus language capabilities of prospective students

#### 3.3.2 The Choice of Host Universities, Cities and Countries

Participants from the boot camps asked for “A wider choice of receiving universities and countries”. There is a huge imbalance of receiving countries in the Erasmus Programme, even when taking into account the overall population of each country. This is a tricky problem that has many components. Availability of courses in certain languages (often English), availability of courses that match one’s field of study and semester dates are a few of the components. However, there are also cultural factors. Spain is probably considered by many students to be more exciting than Slovakia, for example.

One reason why this is difficult to find a solution to is that the agreements are signed between different universities (sometimes even between faculties/departments) with no centrally planned balance. This is probably a good order; universities/faculties/departments know who they want to cooperate with and it is unlikely that it would be successful with a central body forcing University of AA to sign

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.erasmuswithoutpaper.eu/news/ewp-publishes-research>.

agreements with University of BB, just to get the balance right. Having said that, perhaps it is worth thinking about different ways of encouraging both students and universities to expand their horizons and think about less-popular universities as potential future destinations. These could be:

- Increase the scholarship for less-popular destinations. This might convince some students to try out an option they would otherwise not have considered.
- Encourage universities to have a wider course selection in English. This would make it possible for more students to go to countries where the language of instruction is not English (or one of the other popular languages, like German or French).
- Introduce “mobility windows” in university programmes. These could, for example, be one semester, during which the course selection is completely optional, or at least very liberal. This would mean that the students would be less bound by the exact course availability of certain universities.
- Support universities in less popular destinations with their marketing efforts

### 3.3.3 Accessibility

One of the participants in the live chat expressed concern about the accessibility of the Programme. Having been on a European Voluntary Service as a disabled person herself, she obviously found this to be very important. Indeed, there are several ways of making the Programme more accessible<sup>8</sup>. These could be<sup>9</sup>:

- Make *cities and the surroundings* of universities more accessible. Some steps have been taken to map the accessibility of universities (see footnote 2) but this “only” covers university buildings. There are initiatives such as [wheelmap.org](http://wheelmap.org) and [jaccede.com](http://jaccede.com) that are mapping public places (shops, museums, pubs, parks, etc.) and these should be supported.
- Make information about Erasmus accessible. There are many ways of doing this, such as by changing the layout of websites so that those with visual impairments can read them or having subtitles for video messages.
- Connected to this, information about supplementary grants, top-up grants, practical information for students with disabilities, etc., should also be made more available.
- Finally, on a broader European level, there are already a number of EU regulations on accessibility. The recommendation here would rather be to make sure that these are respected and implemented at university level.

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<sup>8</sup> According to the official results published by the European Commission, the percentage of students with disabilities participating in an Erasmus mobility for studies was 0.06% in 2006-2007, 0.13% in 2009-2010 (230 out of 177.705 students) and 0.16% in 2012-2013 (339 out of 212.522 students). The percentage of students with disabilities participating in an Erasmus mobility for traineeships was 0.08% in 2009-2010 (27 out of 35.661) and 0.09% in 2012-2013 (49 out of 55.621).

<sup>9</sup> These recommendations partly overlap with those expressed by ESN in another project co-funded by the EU (2015-1-FR01-KA203-015303) on the topic of accessibility. A summary of these recommendations can be found at <https://esn.org/mapability-map>.

## 3.4 Others

### 3.4.1 Partner Countries

This is related to what is written about Brexit above. The current Erasmus Programme has 33 full Programme Countries: the 28 EU countries plus Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Turkey and Macedonia. Throughout this project, students from, for example, Serbia (not a Programme country) expressed a concern for their country's future status. Also students from, for example, Turkey (currently a Programme Country) expressed concern about its future participation. While some steps to include non-Programme countries in limited parts of the Programme were taken in 2014 (when Erasmus became Erasmus+), this could be done further. The recommendation is, therefore:

- Keep expanding Erasmus opportunities to non-Programme Countries in the future.

### 3.4.2 Linguistic problems

Many students are worried about not knowing the language of their new host country very well.

Potential solutions could be:

- To strengthen the Online Linguistic Support (OLS) and make it available for a longer period of time before departure;

### 3.4.3 Brexit

Due to the timing of this project, several students - both through tweets seen in the Dashboard and in the live chat - expressed worries about Brexit and Erasmus. This worry goes both ways: will UK students continue to have access to Erasmus exchanges? And will students from other Programme Countries continue to be able to study in the UK?

At the time of writing (September 2017) there seems to be no clear consensus on what will happen post-Brexit. Many stakeholders have expressed a will to keep the UK within the Erasmus Programme. On principle this should be possible even after Brexit: Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Turkey and Macedonia are all full Programme Countries without being in the EU. However, it is also a political question that will most likely be connected to the other Brexit negotiations.

The obvious solution to this worry is of course:

- Ensure that the UK will still be a full Erasmus Programme Country post-Brexit

### 3.4.4 Further Investigations

The Dashboard revealed some other insights that we recommend should be investigated further. For example, one person was concerned that Erasmus students were being mixed up with official migration figures.

However, there are some programme specific issues that could be put forward for consultation with young people or recommended for further research:

- Investigation is needed to see if universities are profiteering from the charges and fees for alternative language test papers. Perhaps they should be capped?
- How to safeguard the Psychological welfare of students, particularly in the first few months. Perhaps via online clinics?
- Look at the possibilities for commodity exchange or brokerage among students (for example, access-to or disposal of bicycles).

## Background information



This report is part of the project *Digital Ecosystem for E-Participation Linking Youth (DEEP-linking Youth)*, co-funded by the European Commission.

The aim of the project is to explore how e-participation can foster young people's empowerment and active participation in democratic life. The project tests the functioning of a digital ecosystem for youth engagement by bridging technology and young citizens on a common task with the aim to provide quality input to decision-making in view of producing a sustainable impact.

The project runs from 1st of December 2015 to 30th of November 2017.

The partners of the project are the following:



### **The European Citizen Action Service (ECAS)**

The European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) (<http://www.ecas.org/>) is an international non-profit organisation, based in Brussels, with a pan-European membership and 26 years of experience. It provides services to a network of about 150 civil society organisations and to numerous citizens on EU citizens' rights enforcement and civic participation in the EU decision-making process.

ECAS' mission is to empower citizens to exercise their rights and promotes open and inclusive decision-making through the provision of high quality advice, research and advocacy, as well as capacity-building for civil society organisations.



### **Erasmus Student Network (ESN)**

The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) ([www.esn.org](http://www.esn.org)) is the biggest non-profit organisation acting in the field of student mobility and internationalisation of higher education. It provides support services to over 180,000 international students on an annual basis and works for their needs by facilitating and improving the conditions of their mobility period, ensuring social cohesion and reintegration, and by enhancing intercultural awareness as well as active citizenship and participation in Europe.

ESN contributes to the creation of a more mobile and flexible education environment by supporting student exchanges from different levels and providing internalisation at home.



### **The Consultation Institute**

Founded in 2003, The Consultation Institute (TCI) is a UK-based, not-for-profit organisation that has a large member base made up primarily of local authorities, utility companies and software providers.

The Consultation Institute's mission is to promote the highest standards of public, stakeholder and employee consultation by initiating research,

publications and specialist events in order to disseminate best practices and improve subsequent decision-making.

TCI undertakes training, consultancy, evaluation, quality assurance and benchmarking across the spectrum of consultation opportunities and has an active interest in social media and the role of digital dialogues for policy-makers.



### **Civil Kollégium Alapítvány (Civil College Foundation)**

Civil College Foundation (CCF) is a nationwide adult education organisation focusing on community development, community work and citizen studies. Over the last 20 years, CCF has become a leading organisation in civil society development in Hungary, with intensive connections and strong network with several hundred civil society organisations and local communities across Hungary and with outreach to and collaboration with many European and some U.S. partners.

CCF is involved in the activities of several working structures in order to represent the interests of citizen and community participation in the decision-making processes both at the national and international level.



### **ProInfo Foundation**

ProInfo is a Bulgarian not-for-profit organisation involved in strengthening citizen participation at national, cross-border and European level.

It serves as a civic resource centre on European matters, assisting the process of civic capacity building for effective participation in the European policy-making process and the strengthening of the European identity of Bulgarian citizens.

ProInfo also has vast experience in the creation of media content for TV and on-line distribution, including specialised resources on focused EU-related news and television series on citizen participation, integration of minorities, economic policy and more.



### **Gong**

GONG is an independent, non-partisan and non-governmental organisation promoting human and citizens' rights. It represents one of Croatia's most influential and outspoken public policy advocacy organisations, engaged in a number of legislative and policy monitoring initiatives geared towards greater transparency and fairness of the electoral process, management of conflicts of interest of public officials, improved access to information, more inclusive policy-making, greater accountability and quality of governance of national and local public authorities, and encouraging civic participation.

Its goals include reaching the highest possible democratic standards of the electoral system, high standards of governance and political accountability, and active, yet responsible participation of citizens and CSOs in decision-making processes at regional, national and EU level.



### **Íbúar samráðslýðræði ses - Citizens Foundation**

Citizens Foundation is a non-profit organisation that works to bring people together to debate and prioritize innovative ideas to improve their communities. Since 2008, Citizens Foundation has developed open source tools and methods to promote online, democratic debate and to increase citizens' participation in their community in Iceland and worldwide. It developed the online open source e-democracy platform "Your Priorities" that allows people to start their own e-democracy website, submit ideas, vote to support or oppose ideas, and debate ideas.

Its main goal is to help citizens get their voices heard and to encourage citizens participation in governance.







