

The role of students in the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education 2021–2027

*How to better implement the ECHE commitments
through ESN-HEI collaboration*

Introduction: co-creating a better programme from its grassroots

The many features of the Erasmus+ programme have made it the EU's flagship initiative. It is the best possible expression of a union of citizens brought together by a common set of values and the willingness to share and exchange experiences.

One of these key features which have ensured the continuous improvement of the programme, and persisted over the past 30 years, has been its participatory character. Civil society organisations and student representatives have been involved directly at the European level, being part of the decision making process and providing an insight into the challenges of the programme. Besides using the tools provided by the programme, such as KA2 and KA3 projects, organisations like the Erasmus Student Network have been in constant dialogue with European Commission representatives, forwarding proposals and demands coming directly from the real protagonists of the programme: the participants.

The process of co-creation of the new Erasmus programme, including the new Erasmus Charter for Higher Education, has been a great example of the benefits of this approach. ESN has been involved since the beginning of this process, when it launched the [#ErasmusUpgrade Manifesto](#). Thanks to the contributions of different stakeholders, the new programme will be more participatory, more inclusive, greener, and include a strong civic engagement component. The 2021 -2027 Erasmus programme will also be much more simple and digital, with ESN being involved in initiatives such as the new Erasmus+ App or the Erasmus Without Paper projects.

In order to reach all the objectives and boost the potential of the programme when it comes to empowering young people across Europe and beyond, **the framework provided by the new ECHE should be used by Higher Education Institutions to increase their collaboration with student associations at the local level, involving them in the design and in the implementation of the internationalisation strategies.** The new

programme gives us the opportunity to leave behind past approaches in terms of students involvement in internationalisation, moving on to new schemes in which students are part of the decision making process and have an active role in both shaping and implementing policies and initiatives.

Erasmus Student Network is the largest Erasmus alumni network in Europe, with 530 local associations spread around 42 countries within the European Higher Education Area. ESN has been working to improve the Erasmus programme for more than 30 years, collaborating with all relevant stakeholders at the European, national and local levels. Therefore, we believe that by upscaling the ways in which HEIs and ESN sections cooperate across Europe we will be making a crucial step to ensure impactful internationalisation for all.

With all this in mind, this document aims to present clear ways in which ESN sections can contribute to a better achievement of the ECHE principles and commitments by HEIs.

Before mobility

Reaching students who were not even considering taking part in a mobility and preparing students for their upcoming experience will be crucial to guarantee the success of the new programme.

Widening participation: access and inclusion strategies

Equality and Diversity should play an important part in the internationalisation strategies of Higher Education Institutions. Peer to peer approaches and mentoring have proven to be great multipliers for students from underrepresented groups, in order for them to feel included in the Erasmus experience. ESN sections can join forces with other student associations in the HEI to identify barriers to mobility faced by different types of students. Specific measures may be put in place by the HEI to counter

those barriers. ESN is currently coordinating the [Social Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility Erasmus+ project](#), which aims to contribute to this process.

In order to increase the number of students participating in mobility, proactive measures should also be implemented. ESN can disseminate the value of the mobility experience at welcome sessions dedicated to first year university students, so they can start considering the options they have to go abroad by listening to real testimonials.

More visibility to current international students and more opportunities for interaction between local and international students in the HEI can also have an important role, while fostering the creation of bonds between local and international students. ESN has studied this process in depth during the [SocialErasmus+ project](#). Activities like Mobility Fairs are very successful when done right, and ESN can take care of their organisation with the proper support from the HEI. Besides, we recommend taking into account the [recommendations](#) made by the Inclusive Mobility Alliance, which aim to foster international students' mobility among students with disabilities.

[Parental educational background and the mobility culture](#) of a University impact the chances of participation on mobility experiences (JRC, 2019). Bringing internationalisation and mobility to pre-universitary education may contribute to bridging this gap, awakening curiosity of local students while fostering citizenship education. ESN's Erasmus in Schools, as well as other [International Higher Education for Society](#) (DAAD, 2020) initiatives show how community engagement can be beneficial to students, universities and the general community. Medium and long term plans in terms of participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds should be created, including these kinds of measures.

Preparing students to maximise the learning experience

Developing cross cultural competence is a milestone of any international student exchange. In the Erasmus programme, cross cultural competence may also serve to foster active citizenship and curiosity for other EU countries and cultures. This being said, this competence should not be taken for granted (Chwialkowska, 2020). The so-

called Erasmus bubble, among other factors, can diminish the impact of Erasmus' learning process.

Pre departure preparation is many times overlooked by HEIs due to time constraints, lack of human resources and complexity. It is important that students reflect on the impact of the Erasmus programme on their personal and professional life. ESN is part of the [Erasmus Skills project](#) that will allow Erasmus students to assess their knowledge, skills and attitudes before and after their mobility experience to evaluate how the programme influenced them.

Preparation, implemented in the right way, can equip students with lots of useful knowledge and ideas on how to approach their Erasmus experiences . ESN sections are used to organising all kinds of activities related to intercultural exchange, in which future Erasmus students can take part and get to know international students from their future Erasmus destinations. Ad hoc activities can be jointly organised at the beginning of each semester, so ESN volunteers and current international students can share their vision on how to approach the abroad experience, and exchange ideas with future Erasmus students.

ESN sections can also coordinate the set up of pre-departure mentor systems, in which students who have been awarded an Erasmus mobility are matched with current Erasmus students from their future Erasmus destinations, or former students that went to this destination.

Accommodation

Accommodation is one of the biggest concerns for Erasmus students, with students finding many challenges which can affect the quality of their experiences, as described in the [HousErasmus+ recommendations](#). ESN sections and HEIs may collaborate in different forms, making it easier for students to find trustworthy and quality accommodation in their Erasmus destinations. Accommodation groups in social media and collaboration with accommodation providers are among the most common practices, and they can also be tailored to the characteristics of every HEI.

During mobility

Erasmus students can and should be the best possible drivers of internationalisation in both the University and the hosting local community. Reinforced efforts by HEIs, along with better cooperation with ESN sections to implement already existing practices, can ensure the Erasmus experience serves as an enabler for active citizenship and internationalisation for society.

Integrating students into the University and the community

Student-led [Buddy System](#) schemes remain the best possible way to approach integration of newly arrived Erasmus students. The ESN section can coordinate the implementation of the programme, going beyond matching and organising activities throughout the semester to bring together international students and buddies. Done right, this can be a great tool to foster internationalisation at home, also for students who have not participated in a mobility experience.

HEIs and ESN sections may also plan together activities for the welcome weeks and the rest of the semester, which can foster intercultural exchange and understanding. These practices may include cultural activities, language tandems and trips. The ESN section can get support from the IRO and then report once the activity has been done, or at the end of the semester.

Involving other local institutions and stakeholders in the activities is also a great practice, which many HEIs and ESN sections already do. This can include municipalities and regional governments, among others. Activities to connect students with the local culture, its history and its people can be beneficial for all parts. In addition to that, it is significant to ensure that all the factors of the learning mobility experience are equally valued and supported. Studies, integration, social engagement and psychological well-being, are all aspects of the exchange students' life and in order to maximise the benefits from such an experience and highlight the value of quality learning mobility,

the stakeholders involved, such as local authorities, HEIs and student organisations should hold a joint responsibility to develop suitable strategies to support this reality.

Erasmus students as ambassadors: bringing Erasmus values to local communities

ESN has been working on the topic of active citizenship of Erasmus students for years, organising thousands of initiatives across Europe each year and measuring the overall impact of the experience through research like the [ESNsurvey 2019](#). ESN has also promoted the role of the Erasmus programme as an [enabler of active citizenship in the European Parliament, along with other civil society organisations](#). During the 2019 European Parliament elections, ESN was one of the main contributors to the #ThisTimeImVoting campaign, [reaching more than 4 million people](#).

Internationalisation at home is a crucial component of international education. Even if not all students are able to take part in mobility experiences, the benefits of internationalisation can reach a big part of the student population and the wider public when appropriate measures are put in practice. Volunteering on exchange and other related initiatives in which Erasmus students have an active role interacting with the local population are the best way to foster this kind of internationalisation (ESAA, 2017).

Through the SocialErasmus+ project, ESN has developed all the necessary tools for HEIs to implement ambitious community engagement activities in cooperation with ESN sections. Bringing together pupils, international students and volunteers can have great benefits, especially in less well-off neighborhoods. [Erasmus in Schools](#) activities, where Erasmus students facilitate workshops and other kinds of sessions for local pupils in all types of pre-University educational levels, can be a great opportunity to upgrade collaboration between HEIs, student representatives, schools and local/regional authorities.

Besides the crucial school aspect, **SocialErasmus activities can be implemented in all kinds of fields connected to the Sustainable Development Goals**. Developing local

projects with Erasmus students and local associations will help students establish a “from local to global” perspective, providing a better understanding of the main challenges of their hosting communities and the connection with pressing global challenges such as Climate Change or rising inequalities. ESN can coordinate the activities, serve as a link with the associations and report directly to the HEI.

Erasmus students are not only the best possible ambassadors of the programme itself, but of the European project and its values as whole. ESN sections and HEIs may partner up with EC Representations, EP Liaison Offices Europe Direct to join forces and create common dissemination campaigns, or add new features to existing initiatives like together.eu or the European Parliament Ambassador School programme. These campaigns can help foster engagement on EU related topics and bring EU topics closer to young people in a fresher format.

After mobility

Providing students with opportunities to continue building upon their international experiences and fostering their engagement as alumni of the programme require efforts from HEIs, but it will be easier to achieve it in collaboration with ESN sections. ESN analysed this topic in the [ESN Survey 2016](#).

Keeping alumni engaged

The new ECHE places a lot of emphasis on the importance of fostering engagement of past participants. ESN has been successfully doing so for the last 30 years, building a community of thousands of members from all over the world. Actively promoting the opportunity to join ESN, as well as any other international student organisation, will help the students develop their networks and remain connected with an international environment, and more importantly, keep on disseminating the values of the Erasmus+ programme.

Besides this, ESN sections and HEIs can organise different activities targeting Erasmus Alumni, regardless of if they have joined the organisation. These can include meetings, debates, tandems with new Erasmus students or social media campaigns. ESN currently reaches more than 40.000 erasmus buddies across Europe.

Reflecting on their learning process and the competence development will also be a key component of the post Erasmus experience. HEIs and ESN sections can jointly organise workshops and sessions to address these aspects, in which ESN's background in non formal education methodologies can be extremely helpful. This can help in order to identify employability perspectives and opportunities for erasmus alumni. ESN is currently involved in the [ErasmusJobs](#) project, which aims to boost employability opportunities for Erasmus students.

Conclusion: better together

As we have seen throughout this document, HEIs and ESN local sections have many opportunities to work together towards the ECHE principles and commitments. **The absolute key to ensure a smooth collaboration is always the same: fluent and constant communication.** Meetings can be organised in a regular way and the ESN section can report its activities and initiatives to the HEI, helping it to stay updated and channeling the feedback from the Erasmus students.

All the ideas explained in this document can be adapted to the needs and characteristics of both HEIs and local sections. We are totally sure that in all cases, this collaboration will help to improve the Erasmus experience, and to continue enriching society through international students.

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