

Engaging young people around the world through international opportunities

ESN's reaction to the Youth Action Plan in
EU external action



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The European Commission and the European External Action Service have released its first-ever [Youth Action Plan in external action](#) to promote meaningful youth participation and empowerment in EU external action for sustainable development, equality and peace. The action plan provides a political framework and operational roadmap for a strategic partnership with young people in the EU's external action and sets out comprehensive measures to ensure that EU external action empowers young people at the political, social, and economic level and help young people engage in decision-making and policy-making in a meaningful and inclusive way.

The Erasmus Student Network welcomes the launch of the Action Plan and applauds the EU's continuous efforts to prioritize youth in its external action strategy for the years 2022 - 2027 in the framework of the Youth Action Plan. As a pan-European organisation with a global outreach and a widespread presence in the EU's Neighbourhood, ESN is committed to contribute to the implementation of the actions outlined in the Action Plan. ESN fully shares the vision that young people play a crucial role in achieving Sustainable Development Goals, UN Youth, Peace and Security Agenda, the Paris Climate Agreement, and other international commitments.

The challenges young people are facing nowadays are increasing daily in light of polarisation, inequality, climate change, and the ongoing war on European soil. Youth has the right to demand prompt, unambiguous responses and the opportunity to influence the policies and decisions that will determine their future. For more than three decades, ESN has been working to foster intercultural dialogue, international cooperation and mutual understanding through internationalisation of education and youth participation. Based on our extensive experience and all the available evidence, ESN believes that access to international learning opportunities, both at home and abroad, are key to create connections among young people and activate them to contribute to their communities.

The Youth Action Plan is a timely endeavour to involve young people in EU external action and generally enhance the quality of interaction with young people worldwide, especially in times of the strategic autonomy and geopolitical relevance of the European Union. Many of the

commitments included in the Action Plan will require coordination with Member States, since the proper implementation will depend on them considering their competences.

The European Action Plan identified three pillars of action to shape the external action in partnership with young people.

- 1) Engage:** Increase young people's voices in policy and decision-making at all levels;
- 2) Empower:** Fight inequalities and provide young people with the skills and resources they need to prosper and fulfil their potential
- 3) Connect:** Foster opportunities for young people to network and exchange with their peers.

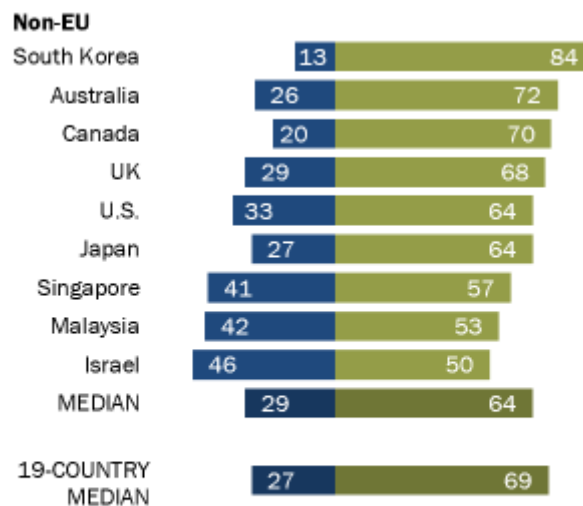
While all the given pillars remain relevant, ESN would like to target the third pillar, based on the organization's nature and interests, and as a key driver to reach the objectives of pillars 1 and 2. The "Partnership to connect" pillar aims to promote youth mobility, exchanges, and networking as an essential aspect of the Youth Action Plan. One of the key components of this area, identified by the Youth Action Plan, is ***increasing opportunities for mobility in education, training, and work.***

As an organisation that serves as a platform for continuous dialogue between EU and non-EU young people, ESN believes that the importance of this third priority should be highlighted. While all three building blocks of the action plan are essential and target the challenges and opportunities of youth in the EU's external action, ESN takes this opportunity to draw attention to some of its insights derived from ESN's extensive experience and close collaboration with the youth organization within and outside the EU and encourage the European Union and its member states to consider below-mentioned factors in the implementation of the Youth Action Plan.

Promoting meaningful contacts among young people

The action plan explains how many of the Action Plan's goals can be achieved by promoting inclusive learning mobility and increasing learning opportunities, as well as fostering exchanges for young people's professional and personal development. The action plan also underlines mechanisms and tools which are expected to support the achievement of the objectives, including EU Platform for Regular Dialogue with Youth Organizations, as a new element of the [Policy Forum on Development](#). It is important to consider the current barriers that students from non-EU countries face to participate in mobility, such as visa issues or selection processes. ESN is glad to see the ever-expanding role of the Erasmus+ programme in the EU's external action strategy, and hopes that more financial synergies and diplomatic support is given to the programme in the next few years.

[Latest data](#) from Pew Research centre shows that The European Union retains a broadly positive image internationally, and that the EU’s perception is more favourable among adults below 30 than older cohort. This is something that ESN also sees in its work in the EU Neighbourhood, and through the mobility opportunities that are provided to students from outside of the Union. For instance, in the Eastern Neighbourhood, the EU is the most [trusted](#) international organization, especially among young people. Youngsters and youth organizations are willing to promote the European way of life and expand their experiences within and in collaboration with the EU. This is a unique opportunity to turn young people all over the world into the EU’s most important allies internationally, but it is important to avoid complacency and take this positive image for granted. The EU provides great opportunities for non-EU youth, but there important issues that should be addressed.



Note: Those who did not answer not shown.
 Source: Spring 2022 Global Attitudes Survey. Q5c.

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The role of learning mobility programmes

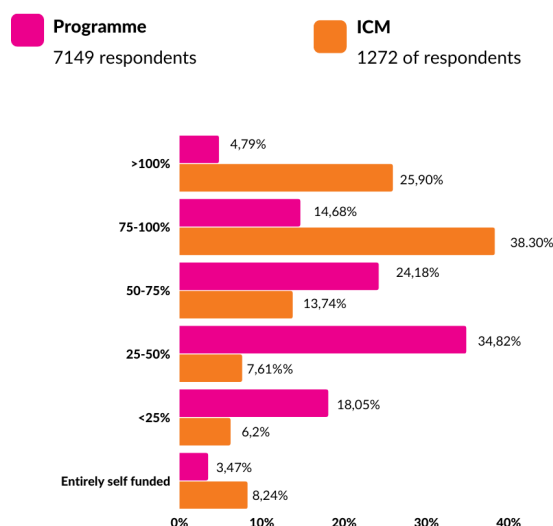
Learning mobility programmes across sectors, such as Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, are among the most impactful tools to foster meaningful dialogue among young people from both EU and non-EU countries. Although the Action Plan acknowledges this role, it falls short of going more in detail in the next steps to boost the strategic dimension of these programmes clearer.

The remarkable success of International Credit Mobility

Erasmus+ international mobilities outside the EU became more widespread during the 2014-2020 programming period, with growing funding throughout the 7 years period and a remarkable impact on participants and institutions alike. ESNsurvey data shows that [ICM participants are more satisfied with their mobilities](#) than their intra-European peers, and that these run more smoothly than intra-European mobilities, likely due to higher resources allocated to them. ICM scholarships are also considerably higher than most intra-European ones, and allow students to cover a high percentage of their expenses.

Coverage of mobility costs by scholarship, percentage (general sample, n = 8454)

ESNsurvey - XIV edition data

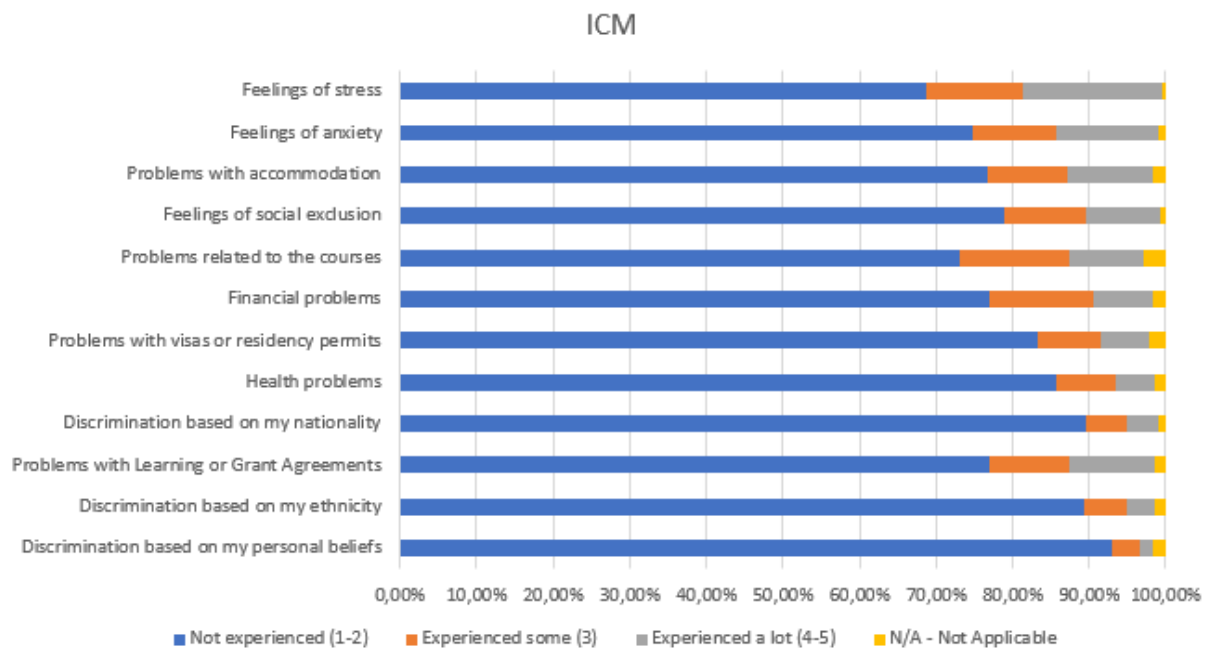


Despite the growing number of International Credit Mobilities (KA 171 - Higher Education Mobilities supported by external policy funds in the [Erasmus+ programme guide](#)), **the balance between staff and student mobilities is still problematic, and also difficult to analyse due to the way in which data is published in the Erasmus+ Annual reports.** Staff mobility is a fantastic tool to build capacity, strengthen links between institutions and foster internationalisation at home, but the majority of International Credit Mobility funds should be allocated to student mobility. This serves a dual purpose: improving internationalisation of Higher Education in partner countries and also giving opportunities to young people. The Erasmus Student Network considers that around ¾ of ICM funds should fund study mobilities.

Inclusive mobility in ICM has become a key priority for the European Commission. Besides the aforementioned importance of increasing the focus on study mobility, there is a strong need for

further work in aspects such as the **selection process** of students and support measures for incoming students, both from an academic and social integration perspective. The categories to define who qualifies for fewer opportunities support should take into account the reality of the applicant students, such as geographical barriers related to the lack of consular offices.

Main issues experienced by Erasmus + International Credit Mobility students (ICM) (N = 1587)
Data from ESNsurvey - XIV edition



In public diplomacy, details matter. From the engagement perspective, **external action in the field of youth should heavily focus on facilitating the visa process for young people.** Extensive research and experiences, including the data from the ESNsurvey, demonstrate that visa problems remain one of the key challenges in international mobility, due to lack of smooth procedures of bureaucracy, national problems, digital barriers of international offices that work to allow visas, and other related issues. Data from the survey and abundant anecdotal evidence from ESN's work on the ground points to potential breaches of the [EU's Directive 2016/801](#), on the conditions of entry and residence of students, researchers and volunteers.

Usually, people from wealthy states can enter the EU relatively easily. Many citizens of less developed nations must overcome far higher obstacles. A Schengen visa may not always be granted to non-EU individuals for short exchange or mobility purposes, for the issues that people can face mentioned before. It is important to highlight that even if not all students from non-EU countries face these issues, the qualitative data

The Youth Action Plan's implementation is put in doubt by the aforementioned barriers. In order to make mobility a reality for all, one of the objectives of the European Education Area and the Strategic Framework, national, local, and regional authorities should be further

involved in aspects related to student support in this respect. The Youth Action plan can represent a strong policy framework to encourage the visa facilitation process and therefore, expand the opportunities for youth and youth organizations, even if those depend on Member States.

Incentives and extra support for the selection of European Solidarity Corps participants

The European Solidarity Corps is probably the EU's most inclusive youth mobility programme: no formal qualifications are required and any young person can participate. Participation is possible for young people from many of the EU Neighbourhood countries, which brings a fantastic opportunity not only for themselves but also for the organisations and communities that host them. Unfortunately, managing the administrative process of hosting non-EU ESC volunteers places an insurmountable burden on hosting organisations due to the continuous problems created by national, regional and local authorities. This also causes significant issues for volunteers themselves, who spend months amid a huge level of confusion on whether they will be able to successfully complete all the necessary administrative steps, despite having all the right to reside in an EU Member State, and doing it as beneficiaries of an EU programme.

The case for an expanded outreach of the Erasmus+ programme

The Erasmus+ programme embodies a great practice of how EU programmes can become more impactful by welcoming third countries as full members. Currently, the programme has 33 countries as members, and a number of actions are open to organisations from different parts of the world. This global scope should be further strengthened in the current programming period and beyond, with a dual approach:

- The European Commission should make efforts to increase the number of Erasmus+ programme countries, **starting by a renewed push for the [reassociation of Switzerland](#)** (a country in which civil society and the academic community has clearly expressed its willingness to join) and also setting the foundations for a potential re-joining of the UK, which is supported by a [growing number of British citizens](#). Just like in Horizon Europe, the European Commission should explore a revamped “membership system”, in which partner countries can engage with the programme in more ways, potentially also through financial contributions.
- The number of opportunities available to organisations from third countries should gradually increase, especially when it comes to access to learning mobility opportunities. Synergies with other funding sources at different levels should support these efforts.

Partnerships to engage: why adequate support to youth organisations makes a difference

Youth organizations should be at the forefront of the different actions and objectives outlined in the Action Plan. Established organizations that are democratically led and connected to international networks can have a significant impact in bringing about changes in their local communities, empowering young people to incorporate a global perspective in their daily activities.

However, it has become increasingly common for the EU and other international organizations to engage with young individuals rather than organizations in their consultations. **While individuals may have outstanding qualifications or inspiring stories, it is essential to recognize that working with youth representatives of democratically run organizations is crucial for achieving the objectives of the Action Plan.** These organizations provide the necessary accountability, institutional memory and capacity for growth and transformation required to effectively implement the plan.

In particular, increased support is needed in the Enlargement and Neighbourhood countries of the EU, where institutions and key stakeholders still lack an understanding of the importance of supporting and growing youth organizations' actions, projects and ideas. Additionally, ESN's sections located in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries have reported difficulty in establishing direct and easy connections for their volunteers.

Key challenges faced by non-EU youth organisations

In that regard, it is important to highlight that youth organisations within the non-member states also face great challenges, including ones related to expansion and structural disadvantages. ESN is currently present in 14 non-EU members, covering all the Eastern Partnership and almost all Western Balkan countries, with other 4 candidate countries from neighbourhoods. Therefore, the organisation has had an experience of recognizing these challenges.

In the last years, ESN has analysed these challenges more in depth, as our associations become stronger in those countries. This process has allowed us to develop a more in-depth understanding of the issue.

Some of the key challenges that youth organisations with a strong European orientation face are:

- Lack of support for their internal support and governance aspects: In many cases, project-oriented funding that is normally offered by EU delegations does not help organisations to acquire the needed level of internal development to become an important player and have an impact on their communities. In order to have an impact in terms of outreach and communicating about EU opportunities, first a solid structure should be built. EU delegations can provide legal support with the registration process, or with the organisational aspect, building on the experience of other strong civil society organisations. They can also serve as a link with potential philanthropy donors or policy makers.
- **Inadequate support for engagement in international networks and umbrella organisations:** On a similar note, organisations that decide to join international networks such as the Erasmus Student Network struggle to receive support to properly participate in these networks on an equal basis compared to their peers. Funding is normally offered to carry out dissemination initiatives, without considering that supporting the participation of organisations from neighbourhood or strategic countries in organisations (in terms of participation in the governance, capacity building events or other relevant initiatives) with an important EU presence is one of the best ways to build meaningful people to people dialogue.
- **Expectation mismanagement in terms of the role that organisations can have:** Understanding how youth organisations operate, and the potential benefits that engaging with them can have without engaging in tokenisation is key to unleash their potential. It is important to engage in co-design processes. EU officials, especially those working in the delegations, should be trained to understand the dynamics and potential of youth organisation, as well as acquiring a good overview of the EU landscape in terms of youth and student organisations

For instance, the youth organisations in the non-EU states require further support to draw lessons from the structures of the EU youth organisations as well as receive funding to internally develop.

The European Union has invested in promoting the EU values and norms in partnership with youth organisations in non-EU countries, however, further investment and a structural dialogue are needed to support them develop internally to have a broader reach and influence on promoting youth agenda in their respective countries and externally.

Conclusion: let's work with youth representatives in this ambitious journey

While the outlined pillars of action are designed to facilitate young people's participation in decision-making, education, and training, as well as promote networking and knowledge sharing, the Youth Action Plan should also draw lessons from the experiences of youth organisations, such as ESN, to further explore the key areas of improvement of youth action in non-EU states.

Erasmus Student Network also outlines that new umbrella initiatives for youth work or policies should be introduced and implemented carefully while respecting the already existing ones, therefore fragmentation is not encouraged.

This being said, ESN hopes that the new Youth Action Plan will also invest in further development and empowerment of already existing youth networks and initiatives, that hold great experience, insights, and potential to support the successful implementation of the Youth Action Plan.

Erasmus Student Network remains firmly committed to ensuring the fairness and inclusion of youth within and outside the EU and expresses its readiness to closely cooperate with the EU institutions, as well as respective states, institutions, and organizations to support the implementation of the Youth Action Plan in external action.

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