
Europe 2020 Strategy – Increase of Student Mobility

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With levels of youth unemployment in Europe reaching as high as 23% in 2012¹, a key part of the Europe 2020 development strategy is to get Europe's youth working. The 10 year plan to improve Europe's economy aims towards "smart, inclusive and sustainable growth" in five key areas; Employment; Research and development; Climate change; Education; and Poverty and social justice. The initiative directly involved with increasing youth employment is "Youth on the Move"- a strategy facing an uphill battle to tackle youth unemployment which in some regions reached as high as 56% in 2012. But what part with higher education play in this fight?



The " Youth on the Move " (further YOTM) strategy has big ambitions for higher education in Europe. To make the EU workforce more competitive in a globalised, and what they call "knowledge-based economy" YOTM aims to see 40% of 30-34 year olds having received a form of tertiary education by 2020. Graduates with ICT (Information and communications technology) and language skills must be produced, and the knowledge triangle of "education, research and innovation" must be strengthened. We need graduates that are mobile and flexible, and able to take advantage of job opportunities all over Europe, not only in their home countries. It all sounds very dynamic, exciting and impressive, and to the layman, perhaps a little abstract. A "flexible graduate" simply sounds like a student with an aptitude for gymnastics. What does it all actually mean, in real terms, and what will it mean for EU citizens?

The answer to this question may hide within a program that many of us are already on quite intimate terms with: Erasmus. The next seven years (2014-2020) will see the program expanding like a fresher's waistline. By 2020 the EU hopes to increase the number of students studying or doing a work placement abroad from 380,000 per annum to 5 million, a massive 20% of all graduates in the European Higher Education Area. Young people who travel as part of their education are more likely to be mobile when looking for work, and studying abroad furnishes them with many skills that make the transition to working in a foreign country easier - language skills, life experience, the ability to adapt, greater cultural awareness and a general worldliness. The EU will be pumping a further 19 billion euros into the program, and part of the plan is to develop an European Student Loan Guarantee Facility for masters students, a Youth on The Move card, and European skills passports amongst other initiatives aimed at making studying abroad easier and more accessible. Some however have expressed concern with the European Students Union suggesting in a 2012 article that the European Students Loan Guarantee Facility may facilitate a brain drain between unequal regions in Europe. They also do not believe that the Facility goes far enough in dealing with the "structural discrimination against young people in the labour market" that stops them finding work regardless of whether they have a masters degree or not. The Commission however seems confident that increasing mobility is part of the answer and an "Important way in which young people can strengthen their future employability" (2010 Commission Communication on Youth on the Move initiative). However, these developments will be useless unless they come hand in hand with increased employment opportunities for graduates, opportunities that may be created by other YOTM initiatives such as "Your first EURES job" and the European Vacancy Monitor, aimed at bridging the gap between international study and the workplace. It remains to be seen whether these young initiatives can match the success of the Erasmus program. All that can be said is that the word to remember for 2020 will be mobility, mobility, mobility!

1 (According to EU statistics)



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