

The Added Value of EU policy in Education

Background

Although the 1957 Treaty of Rome first made reference to vocational training as an area of EU competence, it was not until the Treaty of Maastricht that education was specifically recognised as a field in which the EU could contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging competition between Member states and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action (Article 165 TFEU). The 2009 Treaty of Lisbon has not altered the Union's competence to carry out actions to support, coordinate or supplement those of the Member States, but it does contain a so-called '*social clause*', under which the Union, when it defines and implements its policies, takes into account requirements linked to the promotion of, *inter alia*, a high level of education and training (Articles 9 TFEU). In recent years, the EU has thus developed a European dimension to education, notably in the area of higher education, where it has stimulated **mobility of students and teachers**. In the last two decades, major progress has also been made in **harmonizing university degree structures and increasing the compatibility of higher education systems**. Transparency of qualifications and skills for both learners and workers throughout Europe has as well improved, thanks to, *inter alia*, Europass systems - facilitating the transfer of qualifications held by individuals.

The benefits of the support given to education at a Union level derive from the cross-border character of the activities in the field, which are additional to those developed at national or regional levels. It is worth noting that only EU programmes guarantee that all Member States benefit from mobility and exchange of good practices in the area while ensuring optimal dissemination of results. Hence, EU action in the ground **is a way of filling in the missing links, avoiding fragmentation and realising the potential of a border-free Europe**. In practical terms, the implementation of programmes by the EU offers better value for money and economies of scale - than a series of wholly bilateral relations between Member States in this field would allow- because externalities can be addressed, resources or expertise pooled, and action better coordinated.

ERASMUS

Launched in 1987, the Erasmus programme allocates 500 million euros annually to part-funding the transnational learning mobility of university students and staff. It has brought many positive advantages to young people (269,000 students participated in 2012/13 - a [record-breaking year](#)), firms and to European education and training as a whole. The Erasmus programme:

- **provides opportunities for young people:** Erasmus makes student mobility a reality. **Twenty-five years after its launch, nearly 3 million students have been abroad** for study or training under the Erasmus programme. The scheme has become not just the best known of all European Union programmes, but the most successful student mobility scheme in the world. Under it there has been a **constant increase in the number of students taking part** and a rise in the quality and diversity of the activities.
- **facilitates and enhances skills:** Erasmus improves the quality and efficiency of education by equipping young people with a wider range of competences and skills that are increasingly valued by employers. It focuses on the development of an individual's 'skills set' development such as foreign languages, inter-cultural awareness, adaptability to change and an entrepreneurial mind-set. Mobility boosts job prospects and encourages work mobility later in life, promoting adaptability in the labour market.

- **strengthens the openness and efficiency of labour markets:** Erasmus strengthens links between higher education and business and eases the way for younger people into the labour market. Since 2007, placements in companies abroad have experienced large increases. Grants have been awarded to nearly 200,000 students to undertake placements of this kind.
- **enables innovation and effectiveness in the area of teaching and learning:** Erasmus not only caters for students and higher education staff, but, by funding transnational projects and networks, also allows higher education institutions to work together. For the vast majority of these institutions, taking part in Erasmus has led them to innovate in key areas, such as teaching and learning, recognition of study periods abroad, student support services, cooperation with business, and institutional management. It worth noting that it also enhances creativity and a spirit of entrepreneurship in higher education and training.
- **contributes to enhanced networking and internationalisation:** Erasmus promotes links with third countries and encourages the participation of neighbouring countries and potential future EU candidate countries, strengthening mutual links, which in turn has underpinned the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), via the [Bologna Process](#). With 47 participating countries, the EHEA now stretches far beyond Europe's borders, increases the convergence of degree structures (Bachelor-Master-Doctorate), and **facilitates the mutual recognition of studies** carried out abroad (ECTS credit transfer system). Furthermore, the exchanges are instrumental in improving the quality of the education of today's students and opening up universities and colleges to **cooperation around the world**. In this context, teachers and other staff (for example, university international relations officers) benefit from EU support to teach or be trained abroad, while higher education institutions can benefit by inviting staff from outside organisations to come and teach.
- **promotes European-minded citizens:** Erasmus contributes to a sense of pan-European identity and promotes equity, social cohesion and active citizenship. For many students, Erasmus is their first-ever trip abroad, which allows learning in a multicultural environment, dealing with unfamiliar problems and coping with pressure. It widens their horizons by improving self-confidence and job prospects. *"Give it 15, 20 or 25 years, and Europe will be run by leaders with a completely different socialization from those of today"*, the political scientist Stephen Wolff has said, referring to the so-called 'Erasmus generation'.
- **develops a flexible and mobile workforce:** Erasmus improves Europe's competitiveness and innovation potential, supporting broader development of Europe's economies and societies and contributes directly to the **consolidation of mobility infrastructure** for the 1.5 million young Europeans who study outside their home country, who represent over half the number of foreign students worldwide, even though the EU represents less than 10 per cent of the world population.

Further work to be done

Education and training play a strategic role in supporting the economic recovery of the Union. Good progress has been achieved towards the educational objectives set in the 'Europe 2020' strategy. However, to reverse the impact of the crisis and tackle underlining problems much still remains to be done, above all related to the **lack of relevant skills**, notably digital skills. In terms of specific programmes, a new approach to education and training, '[Erasmus +](#)', will be put into effect. The programme will cover the period of 2014-20 and offer an additional **two million students** in higher education the opportunity to study or train abroad. The novelty is that it encompasses education, training, youth and sport (as it replaces seven existing programmes) and has a budget of almost **15 million euro**, which represents a 40 per cent increase over the funding for the previous seven-year period.

*This 'At a Glance' publication is part of a series of summaries of the added value of existing EU policies in practice. Previous publications in this series include summaries of the benefits of the **European single market** and the added value of EU action in the field of **mobile telephone roaming charges**. For further information, please contact the **European Added Value Unit** of EPRS at: EPRS-EuropeanAddedValue@ep.europa.eu*

Sources: All statistics in this note are from Eurostat or the European Commission unless otherwise indicated.

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