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More **mobility**, more European, more EU

*A report brief on the results of the Erasmus
Generation's focus groups on barriers to
mobility and EU opportunities*



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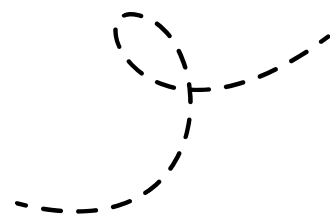
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Introduction

It has been several months since we introduced the **Focus Groups** under the Erasmus Generation in Action (EGiA) project led by the Erasmus Student Network and supported by the European Parliament. Our mission has been to **shed light on the barriers** faced by young individuals when engaging in European Union (EU) opportunities, including mobilities, and to address the challenges they encounter while accessing their rights. Now, after successfully conducting the focus groups, it is time to showcase the trends and findings that have emerged from our extensive efforts.

In our journey to implement these activities, we've accomplished the following key tasks:

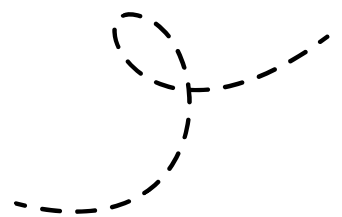
- Our teams have successfully organised around **40 focus groups across various EU countries**. The overall participation of young individuals in these dialogues has been remarkable.
- The focus groups have provided **invaluable feedback and insights** from young participants, helping us understand their perspectives, concerns, and aspirations in the context of EU opportunities and rights.
- The information gathered has become a cornerstone for shaping our strategies to better **support young people in accessing EU opportunities and exercising their rights**. We aim to bridge the gap between aspiration and realisation in the coming phases of EGiA and in general in the work that ESN will be doing in the coming months leading up to the European Parliament elections of June 2024.

These activities align closely with the overarching goal of the EGiA project, encapsulated in the strategic objective of increasing awareness of the opportunities and benefits

available to youth through EU initiatives. By conducting these focus groups, we have taken a significant step toward achieving this.

The EGiA focus groups have been an important success, and we are excited to share the trends and findings that have emerged from these efforts. We believe that the insights we've gained will prove **invaluable in shaping the future of EU initiatives for young people and supporting the work of stakeholders** working on the topics of young people's civic engagement, access to EU opportunities, international mobility, and democratic participation. We look forward to continuing our journey, building on these findings to empower the next generation of EU citizens and contributing to the elections bridging the gap between young people and institutions.

Thank you for your ongoing support and dedication to the EGiA project and read until the end to see the recommendations we have developed acting as a **roadmap** that will frame our work concerning the upcoming parliamentary elections!



MAIN FINDINGS



Main motivations



Engaging with
new people



Enhancing
language skills



Self-development



Immersing in diverse
cultural experiences



Academic
opportunities

As the number of participants in international student mobility **continuously increases**, both within and outside the EU-27, it is expected that motivational factors play a significant and compelling role. When stressing the motivation behind going abroad for learning purposes, most of the participants underscored **engaging with new people** as the **main driving force in their decision-making process**. They indicated that, for example, interacting with new people offers them new perspectives, a chance to learn more, enables the expansion of their social circle, and fundamentally expands their horizons, an experience they eagerly seek when deciding to study abroad.

Another main factor when deciding to go abroad for learning purposes is **enhancing language skills**. The vast majority of the participants expressed the desire to practise their language skills and/or learn a new language, hence they perceive international student mobility as an adequate way of acquiring these skills. Some students highlighted that they “chose the host country to have a chance to learn the language spoken there” or because “knowledge of English was on a decent level but was not utilised in everyday situations.”

The **importance of self-development** was emphasised in all focus groups. Many participants conveyed their willingness to work on their personal empowerment, including self-confidence and self-worth, and view going abroad for learning purposes as a **substantial instrument** in achieving personal development.

The opportunity to study abroad leads to discovering new environments and cultures, therefore **immersing in diverse cultural experiences** has been mentioned as a prominent motivating factor for many. Exploring various cultures that differ from the one participants come from has been positively mentioned as an incentive for mobility decision, given that it represents a journey that paves the way for embracing diversity, learning from others, and developing problem-solving skills, among other benefits. Seeking new adventures, exploring while travelling, and familiarisation with local communities and their customs has also been mentioned by several focus groups in the context of experiencing different cultures.

Academic opportunities are valued positively when deciding about embarking on international student mobility, with every focus group giving certain attention to acquiring ‘enhanced or different’ educational experiences and to exploring a variety of educational systems. **Quality of education** has been singled out as the most important when it comes

to academic opportunities, as well as the availability of specific study programmes. These academic prospects have been associated with **future career prospects**, as focus groups have linked international mobility to **advantage in potential job opportunities** and **enhancing their curriculum vitae**.

In terms of participants' interest in going abroad, it developed predominantly while in highschool through contact with their teachers, friends, and/or ESN sections. This showcases the **relevance of exchange programmes**, as students have been aware of the opportunities as early as highschool. It also adds another layer of importance to the work of civil society organisations in **fostering internationalisation and cultural exchange** in Europe and beyond. Some students mentioned that "involvement in ESN volunteer work brought me new information about mobility opportunities" and that "hearing from highschool professors about Erasmus+ acted as a motivation boost to undertake mobility once enrolled in a higher education institution."

Perfect mobility destination

One of the clear messages from students with mobility backgrounds and the ones potentially considering undertaking one was the importance of considering the **cost of living** when selecting an exchange destination. These responses are consistent with the ongoing challenges reported in various ESNsurvey editions, particularly regarding financial support for exchange students. As indicated, when considering an ideal mobility destination, students are **firstly factoring in financial burdens** they might face in a certain exchange location. This, in turn, circumscribes their options pool and dampens inclusivity and accessibility efforts exchange programmes strive to perpetuate. This trend has been persistent **regardless of the participants' country of origin**, and as such can cause many

prospective students to have doubts about their participation. Some of the comments included “When I did my google research the grants didn’t add up to the cost of living in a particular country”, “I really wanted to go to a Scandinavian country for my mobility but realised it will be hard to support myself there”, and “I changed my decision a few times because I was scared of the unexpected costs that can come during my exchange.” Consequently, it can be inferred that this issue stems from incompatibility between the **ever-changing cost of living and the grants schemes of the programmes**, jeopardising the overarching objective goal of guaranteeing inclusive programmes.

Apart from cost of living, **housing availability** came as the second key determinant in what constitutes a perfect mobility destination. According to certain students, having accessible and reasonably priced housing is essential when making destination choices. **Many students faced difficulties** finding accommodation in the host countries, leading some to opt for alternative destinations or even reconsidering their mobility entirely. This aspect has been intertwined with cost of living, stability of the economy of the host country, and financial support offered.

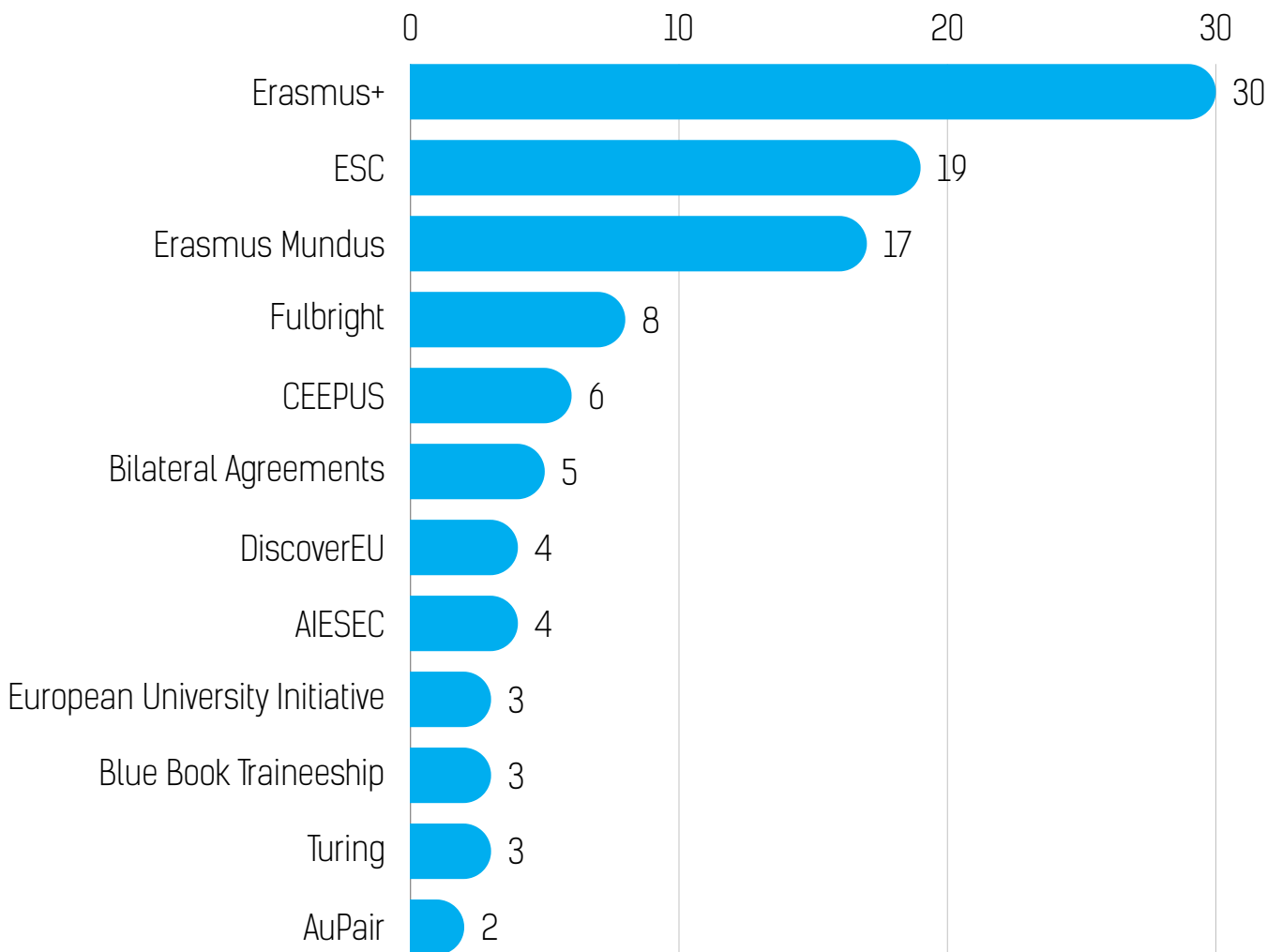
Different patterns emerged when zooming into regional tendencies. Students coming from Western and Southern European countries have mentioned **climate and distance** of the location as somewhat important factors in their decision-making process, whereas students coming from Eastern European countries stressed **security** of the destination and the **quality of education**. Interestingly, the **language** of the host country and the courses offered has been addressed by the majority of the students, no matter the country from which they come. Some students mentioned **cultural differences or similarities** as relevant, suggesting that if the host country’s mindset aligns more closely with their own, it is perceived as a more favorable choice for an exchange destination. One of the students said that they feel “more comfortable in surroundings that are similar to where they come from mindset-wise.”

Awareness of available opportunities

When it comes to the understanding of the awareness regarding EU opportunities (*Graph 1*), **Erasmus+ programme has been universally acknowledged and mentioned by all students participating in the focus groups.** This underscores the program's significant impact and relevance throughout Europe, where it has played a prominent role in internationalization efforts. Close behind, two other flagship EU initiatives, European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus Mundus, are also well-recognised by most of the students. While there is somewhat less familiarity with these two programmes, the majority of students acknowledge their existence and view them as valuable opportunities for youth in Europe. Some students were knowledgeable of these opportunities, but were unable to pinpoint their names, particularly in the case of the European Solidarity Corps. Students said that "I know that volunteering placement exists but information from my university was very scarce" and "Other than Erasmus+ programme, both in terms of study placement and an internship, mobility experiences are way harder to get and there are so many procedures to do in order to secure a spot." These findings indicate that EU opportunities other than Erasmus+ programme face **lower visibility among individuals in Europe and do not receive the same level of promotion and attention from relevant stakeholders**, although they are also part of EU mobility initiatives.

Regarding other EU opportunities, there is an **extremely limited knowledge** of programmes such as DiscoverEU, Blue Book Traineeship, and European Universities initiative, but they were still mentioned by some participants. Non-EU mobility opportunities that gained some traction are Fullbright, CEEPUS, bilateral agreements between universities, AuPair, Turing, and AIESEC. There is **significantly lower awareness of non-EU opportunities**. It is worth noting that students coming from specific countries have been aware of certain non-EU opportunities which are exclusive for their countries, such as government-funded programmes or volunteering activities supported by local or national actors.

Graph 1. Number of focus groups aware of given opportunities



Many of the participants primarily relied on **social media platforms** such as Facebook and Instagram, their home universities and associated international offices, youth organisation, testimonials, internet searches, as well as advice from their friends and classmates to obtain information about these opportunities. Information from home university and social media take precedence over other sources, but there is a distinction in the approach. Some participants stated that they obtained information due to their own curiosity and

eagerness to investigate what's in store for them, while others came across information more passively, without a deliberate intention to search for such opportunities. This reflects how sources of information are **divergent and opportunities are not being comprehensively presented to everyone**, hence one can infer that communication campaigns are not as effective as they are supposed to be. This can come to detriment of certain students' participation and experiences given the lack of awareness and general low levels of knowledge about programmes offered to them.

Rights as (mobile) European citizens

The focus group participants have been aware of their right to freedom of movement and work, access to healthcare through the **European Health Card**, and the **ability to study in any EU country as European Union citizens**. When asked if they were aware of these rights before undertaking mobility, responses are mixed. Some indicated that they did not have a clear understanding of these rights as mobile EU citizens prior to their international exchanges, while others were already aware of them. Among non-mobile participants, a small minority were aware of these rights.

In many target countries, the focus group participants report that they were **not fully aware of their rights to vote in European Parliament Elections and in local elections of their host country**, hence they did not access these rights on their mobility. GDPR rights have been mentioned by a few participants, as well as freedom of speech, freedom of association, and no added fees for roaming. There is a **clear lack of awareness** regarding rights as mobile European citizens, which partially changes once participants undertake mobility. The key shift occurs once participants are preparing for mobility because then they receive the information about their rights. This is also applicable in some cases during mobility.

”

I did not have a clue about the possibility of voting in local elections because it didn't sound right.

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*“My home institution **did not really offer a full list of our rights** as mobile EU students, but my hosting institution provided us with one.”*

Conversely, some participants **have not received any information** about their rights as mobile EU citizens and remained unaware of them throughout their mobility. Other students said that they know they have rights as EU citizens, but were not interested in knowing more because they felt it is not necessary.



BARRIERS



Barriers to participation in international opportunities

All participants have raised similar obstacles to participating in mobility programmes, with no major discrepancies observed across different countries. A unanimous challenge identified by everyone is the **pervasive lack of awareness and information** regarding the programmes, application processes, mobility details, and financial support. Higher education institutions are cited as **one of the sources responsible for the existence of these barriers**, and students collectively believe that their home institutions must take more comprehensive measures to provide credible, trustworthy and unambiguous information about mobility programmes. Some students also addressed **insufficient offer of pre-departure meetings**, as well as **poor promotion** of all the programmes available to students.

*“One pre-departure meeting organised by our international office was **very chaotic** because there were a lot of us and we didn't get enough space to get properly informed.”*

Moreover, another barrier that finds common ground with most participants is the **financial** one. Numerous students emphasised how the grants provided are **insufficient**, hardly covering half of the duration of their mobility. This issue is closely linked to the **housing crisis** that Europe is experiencing, where students are compelled to allocate more than half, if not the entirety, of their monthly grant to cover rent, thereby undermining the quality of their mobility experience. Additionally, a few focus group participants have mentioned the **fear of scams and hidden fees** related to their accommodation in host countries as a noteworthy barrier.

A **overly bureaucratic and long processes** have received substantial attention when talking about other barriers to participation. Most of the students voiced their dissatisfaction with the assistance they received while applying for specific programmes. They believe that in many instances, **this barrier could be easily avoided**, as the absence of supportive structures and complex processes leave them with a sense of disillusionment once the application process concludes.

*“My university **did not really know** that this particular university has a limited number of spots until a lot of us applied and got in.”*

*“I had to submit so much paperwork additionally which **was not specified** in the general rules of exchange admission.”*

In addition, a few participants have emphasised **problems with receiving grant instalments** and that their home institutions were not particularly helpful in resolving this issue.

Among other barriers mentioned, **recognition of ECTS credits** at home institutions and **fear of delayed finalisation** of one's studies were somewhat a concern for the students. Mobile students often encounter difficulties in transferring ECTS credits, and this has a lot to do with the former issue of lack of available and accurate information about the programme. In a similar way, students demonstrated their concern over certain study fields being underrepresented. As stressed by a couple of participants, students in fields like medicine or law have far less opportunities and sometimes receive unappealing offers, in contrast to their counterparts in social studies, for instance, whose options encompass a wider array of host countries and universities.

Barriers such as **geographical distance, intercultural differences, and concerns about exclusion** have been brought into the discussion as well. Geographical distance is one of the barriers students coming from Eastern Europe face the most, which correlates with the data of Western and Southern countries being most preferred mobility destinations. Students from Eastern Europe take into account the distance factor, as they typically have to travel much farther from their home countries compared to students from Western and Southern regions.

Participants from Turkey, Albania, and Ireland raised concerns about **visa-related obstacles**. Since none of these countries are part of the Schengen zone, the mobility process becomes less accessible for them, involving more paperwork and bureaucracy.

Needed support measures

The path towards embarking on international mobility comes with its fair share of obstacles, as stated in the previous section. Targeted focus group participants shed some light on what support measures are essential to make international mobility a smoother and more enriching journey. The support measure considered **extremely important is the information and guidance provided**. The importance and initial guidance cannot be overstated, and it is the first step in helping students navigate the complex world of international mobility. They stressed initial guidance has to be robust and provide them with the tools they need to embark on their journey.

Finding a place to stay in a foreign country can be a daunting task. Students emphasised the **need for support in securing suitable accommodations**, ensuring they start their mobility with a sense of comfort and security. Universities play a pivotal role in students' international experience. A call for larger and more comprehensive support from these institutions was made by students, indicating the potential of host institutions to be true

partners in exchange endeavours. Some participants proposed **mandatory accommodation placements** by hosting universities, as many host institutions do not offer much resources on this issue and leave students on their own. Mandatory accommodation can provide peace of mind and a smoother transition, eliminating the stress of finding a place to live in a new and unknown country.

Paired with calls for more pre-departure guidance, **raising awareness** came up as an important support factor. Students expressed a desire for professors to actively promote the values of international mobility, helping them understand the immense advantages it offers in terms of personal and professional growth. The call for better awareness of the mobility opportunities in schools and the need for quality guidance suggest that **there is a hunger for more accessible international programmes.**

Increasing and adjusting grants is also perceived as an important support mechanism in mobility. Students believe increasing grants for Erasmus+ to accommodate the rising cost of living and housing is crucial to make international mobility financially viable for students.

In terms of reducing bureaucratic hurdles, students support the practical idea of having a **unified version of all paperwork** required by EU universities and a single reference information platform. **Recognition of ECTS credits** remains an issue for many, and simplification of the recognition process and possible standardization of courses is a support measure that would ensure students' do not face complications when transferring their academic progress between institutions.

Apart from ECTS recognition, **diverse opportunities** would be appreciated by students who decide to engage in international mobility. Some students stressed how certain fields are not included in the mobility programmes, hence recognizing the diversity of students'

degrees and providing opportunities tailored to their fields of study will make international mobility more appealing and relevant.

Another support measures welcomed by some participants is the **expansion of international networks** and **engaging with organisations like the Erasmus Student Network (ESN)**. The belief is that organisations such as ESN can foster a sense of community among international students, and that this area has suffered for a long time and has to be given more attention in order to provide the best possible mobility experience.

When minimising the negative effects on personal well-being that might occur during mobility, such as homesickness and the fear of being on your own, **mental health support** has been pointed to as somewhat important to help students navigate these emotional challenges. Many students felt they do not have any appropriate mental health support measures, either offered by their sending institution or the hosting one.

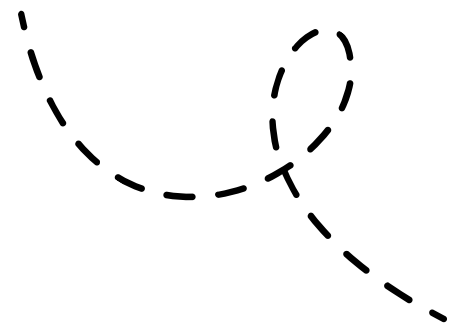
Participants also expressed their willingness to explore **more interactive methods of connecting local and international students**. Many students believe in the importance of schemes such as the buddy system, with one of the comments being that

*“Pairing up locals with the internationals can nurture **cross-cultural friendship** and establish a **support network** for newcomers.”*

Some universities did provide a type of pairing in the form of a **buddy system scheme**, and it was **positively graded** by the students who participated. Others participated in ESN's buddy system scheme which is available across Europe, and there is a significant inclination to broaden it and make it as much accessible as possible. On the contrary, certain students had limited or no interaction with local students, not even through buddy

systems or different events organised during their stay. **Language barriers and insufficient interaction opportunities** have been mentioned as the main impediments to establishing a greater connection with local students. As there is a strong opportunity and ample room for building bridges and deepening intercultural understandings, more considerations within mobility frameworks should be made towards connecting local and international communities.

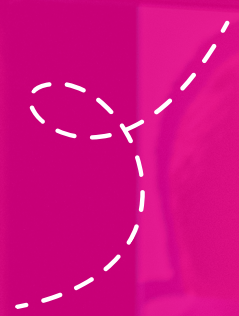
In sum, inferences drawn from these support measures proposals suggest that students are looking for a **holistic approach to learning mobility**, where Higher Education institutions, governments, and civil society organisations come together to create an environment that is not only accessible but enriching for those seeking international experiences. It highlights the importance of financial support, minimization of bureaucracy, expansion of opportunities, and trustworthy communication channels to ensure that mobility is a well-rounded and fulfilling experience.



IMPACT



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he
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Impact of mobility

The impact of mobility at various levels, as perceived by the EGiA focus groups' results, is a testament to the transformative power of personal and societal experiences. Effects are far-reaching and encompass a broad spectrum of individual and collective dimensions.

The most palpable impact of mobility according to the students has been the **removal of prejudices and adoption of open-mindedness**. Students overwhelmingly reported that mobility encourages them to break free from their preconceived notions as they interact with diverse cultures and people. This newfound openness extends to societal topics such as **inclusion, tolerance, and diversity**. Some participants believe that by enriching their understanding of the world, they by default become more proactive in promoting these societal topics, as they strive to build bridges instead of walls between different cultures and communities. This is tightly linked with **neutralising cultural barriers**, as the majority of participants claim that mobility experience not only helped them to understand new cultures but also to share their own, creating an international community that unites.

Another impact noted is the **expansion of social circles** which is important for many participants. By fostering new friendships and contacts across Europe, mobility instils a **deep sense of togetherness**. These connections lead to a network of friends that open doors to new opportunities and meaningful relationships built on compromise and intercultural understanding.

Some participants, namely coming from Eastern and Southern Europe, have raised the point of **feeling more European** after their exchange.

”

Before going abroad for an Erasmus+, being European did not mean much to me, but a whole new perspective of unity in diversity and feeling as a European citizen appeared during my experience.

”

This supports the results of the ESNsurvey on **mobility contributing to a sense of belonging within the European community**. Students highlighted that mobility consolidates the meaning of European citizenship, and on top of that it motivates them to become active citizens who work toward a brighter future for Europe through cooperation and mutual understanding.

Everyone agreed that the impact transcends personal and professional development, as mobility is also very positively reflected on host and home countries. It beneficially impacts the local economy, enhances the openness and tolerance of the local population, and promotes social inclusion. Internationalisation is seen as a catalyst of local economic opportunities, as higher influx of incoming students requires development of more events, activities, and offers in terms of leisure. Overall, students agree that impact on the local community should not be taken for granted. On a similar note, impact is visible in home countries when participants return from their mobilities.

Sizable number of participants stressed that when they returned from mobility, they carried back a myriad of **innovative ideas**, many of which they desired or have proposed for local-level implementation. This included suggestions of changes in certain educational techniques, modernisation of certain processes both in their universities and their cities, and technicalities related to transportation and urban planning. In terms of educational techniques, participants appreciated how they got the chance to gain a **deeper understanding of different universities and how they function**.

Among other impacts, **sharpened language skills**, bringing back to the international community by **volunteering** back home, **improving employment prospects**, and **maturing from a professional standpoint** were also mentioned. Students agree on the majority of impact, but underline that these impacts can vary and are dependent on a multitude of factors. Nevertheless, the **contribution of mobility is unmatched** and should be valued more by different stakeholders.

”

I did not have a clue about the possibility of voting in local elections because it didn't sound right.

”

EU PERCEPTION



Perception of the EU and role of mobility

Students recognise Erasmus+ and similar programmes as a vital tool in raising European awareness among the younger generation. Majority of respondents view it as a means to **foster common dialogue and strengthen the bonds between European nations**. Mobility, in this context, is seen as a powerful connector of nationalities, promoting cultural exchange, peace, cooperation, and the creation of extensive networks. There is wide agreement among focus group participants that Erasmus+ represents a critical component of reaffirming the concept of the EU itself.

Participation in mobility programmes has a profound impact on students' perception of the EU. Many report a **positive shift in their perception**, recognizing the multiple advantages of life in Europe, including freedom of movement, mobility opportunities funded by the EU, and the right to healthcare. One of the students described EU-funded mobility as “a privilege of this century” as they interact with non-EU mobile students who face much more difficulties when going on exchange. On this topic, visa requirements for non-EU students were mentioned, as processes usually take more time and resources. In addition, students acknowledge that the **EU offers a wealth of opportunities for youth**, which in turn, they believe, fosters a stronger European identity.

Students also reported in a high volume that **mobility sparked their interest in EU politics and encouraged them to become more involved in democratic life**. They stress the acquisition of ‘political perspective’ from their time abroad in terms of grasping a more clear understanding of the EU institutions and their works. This realisation connects to the appreciation of how institutions actively support youth and mobility through programmes such as Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps.

Participation in democratic life in the European context

When it comes to the discussion on **democratic participation in the EU context and motivations for voting** in the European Parliament elections, students highlighted various forms of democratic engagement. Vast majority of the respondents have been aware of some forms of democratic participation on the EU level, notably voting in the elections for the members of the European Parliament. Apart from the right to vote, petitions, public consultations, and referendums have been mentioned as ways of democratic participation in the EU. The existence of the European Citizens' Initiative and engagement-oriented opportunities like the European Youth Event was positively mentioned by some participants who expressed their appreciation of the existence of a platform where youth can voice their concerns.

Every participant had some knowledge of different ways individuals can participate in democratic life of the EU, but not everyone has chosen to actively participate. Students highlight the right to vote, right to protest, and right to information as three very important components of democratic engagement in the EU.

When discussing their motivations for participating in the elections for the European Parliament, students offered different but valuable insights. They expressed a **desire to prevent unfavourable outcomes, support policies that are helping young people, and exercise their right to vote because they want to be responsible citizens**. Motivation to vote for some students was intrinsically linked to the perceived impact of their votes on the state of democracy and fundamental freedoms. When asked what would increase their motivation to vote, most answers were focused on seeing tangible results of the

lawmakers on certain matters. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the current state of EU politics because they feel their voices are not being heard.

Furthermore, students emphasised the importance of **easy access to information** about candidates, clear procedures, and the use of language that is comprehensible to all. Some students believe that the **presence of younger political candidates** would encourage higher participation.

*“I see a lot of people over 50 in these important positions, it is hard for me to think they are directing their attention to youth, **they don't know our concerns.**”*

Other respondents argued that **showcasing the real impact of the EU on people's lives through more engaging campaigns and addressing student issues** would increase political engagement.

The overarching issue with youth mobilisation is that **young people currently feel disconnected from politics** and often **believe their votes don't make a difference**. This disincentives them from voting, coupled with a lack of clear understanding of what the EU institutions actually do for the citizens and in what way. Therefore, improving awareness of the EU's governance and its effects on both personal and societal levels is deemed crucial to boost participation and motivate young, often first-time, voters.



