



European Youth Forum Position Paper on 'Junior Erasmus' (individual mobility of school students)

In response to the
Commission proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and
of the Council establishing an integrated action programme in the
field of lifelong learning
2nd Draft

Adopted by European Youth Forum / Forum Jeunesse de l'Union
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Introduction

The European educational programmes have over the years provided thousands of university school students and vocational trainees, teachers and adult learners with the possibility of studying abroad for a shorter or longer period of time. The new Commission proposal on lifelong learning introduces the possibility for funded individual mobility, also referred to as "Junior Erasmus", under Comenius.

The European Youth Forum warmly welcomes the "Junior Erasmus" action, as we believe it will enhance the programme on lifelong learning and bring many direct benefits to young people.

The Junior Erasmus programme is targeted at school students from the age of 15-19 years old. By *school student* we mean a young person involved in a secondary school.

School students are still young enough to absorb a new culture, but old enough to strive consciously to understand the adjustment methods. The school students will not only learn to master a new language, but they will become muticulturally open-minded. Participants in an exchange experience typically develop sensitivity to the social, environmental or political issues in another country, enabling them to see their own culture and belief systems from an outsider's perspective. They acquire insights and skills enabling them to decode the culture and value patterns of other cultures and thus communicate and cooperate successfully across and beyond cultural borders. These skills are becoming more and more important in a globalised world, and it will be important for the future to have many young Europeans with this capacity.

For many, it may be the first opportunity to live away from home and/or actively engage in a community outside of the spheres of family and friends and their own cultural boundaries. Young people typically return from an exchange with a greater sense of personal and community responsibility and greater confidence in their own ability to make positive changes in society.

The European Youth Forum would like to point out some elements it believes will give the programme the best chances of success. They are presented in this position paper.

Access and information

The European Youth Forum believes that the Junior Erasmus should be open and accessible to every school student in Europe. School students should be encouraged to take part in the programme regardless of gender, economic, social, ethnic or religious background. Information about the programme should be available for every school student. National governments should commit themselves to support the implementation of the programme. We welcome the initiative of the European Commission not to limit the programme only to EU member countries.

Management

The Youth Forum welcomes the proposal of the Commission to ensure that all National Agencies are independent from their Ministry and that the various education, training and youth programmes be managed by co-managed agencies. According to the Youth Forum, the National Agencies have a role in building up the sector in general, in fostering networking and in the dissemination of best practices.

Partnerships with the National Agencies

The individual mobility of school students has, so far, been organised both on a public and private level, in some countries in partnership. Thus, each year, thousands of young Europeans spend a school year abroad. Several non-profit youth exchange organisations have been active in this field for over 60 years. These organisations have developed support systems and basic standards for this type of long-term exchanges. In order not to lose already established structures and capacities, the European Youth Forum recommends that the EU and the implementing agencies take into account the vast experience that already exists in this field. We recommend that, pursuant to a certification/accreditation process, existing organisations should work in partnership with National Agencies wherever possible.

The Youth Forum encourages the EU and its National Agencies to use these partners to promote the encounters of young European citizens on a large-scale - thereby also allowing those school students that may not be eligible to participate in a funded exchange (based on existing Comenius partnerships) to be mobile.

Quality in Junior Erasmus

Taking into account the experiences of past mobility actions of the EU and the fact that this type of individual mobility will primarily target minors, the European Youth Forum would like to emphasise the need for quality. Under quality, we understand:

1. **appropriate training** before, during and after the exchange. Through such training the school students will receive the tools to make the best of their experience, for e.g. avoiding problems, learning the most - also on an intercultural level, know where to turn for assistance;
2. appropriate **language training** in the host country to allow for a very wide geographic distribution of exchanges, also targeting countries of less widely spoken languages;
3. complete **risk management** (insurance and support in case of emergency);
4. a stay in **non-paid host families**. The family stay is the most crucial element in an exchange involving minors, as research has shown. The pupil needs to feel welcomed as a full member of the family and not as a paying guest;
5. a **mentoring system** similar to what is already mandatory in the European Voluntary Service. The system needs to be independent from the school and the host family;
6. an exchange period of at least one school term, but preferably longer. In order to maximize the learning potential of the intercultural experience, a **long-term exchange** of between six months and a year has proven to be most beneficial for the exchange student.

These recommendations also mirror the current draft of the EU Commission's "Quality charter on mobility".

Recognition

In order to increase the impact of the Junior Erasmus programme, we believe that international recognition of the participation in the programme is vital. The exchange year should be recognised by the school of residence prior to commencing the Junior Erasmus programme.

Selection

The selection of participants in the programme should be done on the basis of motivation, interest and willingness to learn a new language as well as to adapt to a new environment and culture. The grades and school levels should not influence the selection of participants.

Budget allocation

The budget allocated in total to individual mobility is €357.922m over 7 years. In-service training for teachers together with support for work-experience for future language teachers provides for almost 88 % of the budget and upper secondary pupil mobility only for 4.3 %.

While we recognise the importance of well trained teachers we also think that because this action is the only Community action covering school students it should at least have 10 % of the budget for total individual mobility of the Comenius programme, i.e. € 36m. It is still a fraction of the 4545 million put into student exchanges at university level in the Erasmus programme.

With regards to the funding for the individual mobility of school students it should be pointed out that the budget needs to take into account not only travel and pocket money. It is necessary to set aside additional funding for a proper training and support for the school students. This would correspond to the way in which quality is guaranteed in all other mobility actions of the EU (Erasmus, Leonardo, European Voluntary Service).

Disbursements of funds

In order to ensure equal opportunities for all selection, we believe that the Danish and Norwegian model based on a voucher-system has proven to be the best practice. In this case, the EU contribution is provided to the school student, who may use it in exchange for a (recognised) upper secondary mobility project within Comenius. The school student may choose any exchange organisation that has received accreditation from the national government and/or the National Agencies. Furthermore, it must be ensured that there is full transparency in the selection of the school students according to clear and objective criteria.