



DiscoverEU for all: travelling, learning & volunteering

Position of the European Youth Forum on the DiscoverEU action under the next Erasmus programme.

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Executive Summary

This document lays down the position of the European Youth Forum¹ on the new DiscoverEU action for the Erasmus programme 2021-2027. It analyses the proposal from a youth perspective and outlines some concrete proposals as to how to improve the action and make it aligned with the vision of youth organisations for the Youth Chapter of the Erasmus+ successor programme².

The European Youth Forum has the following priorities:

- Accessibility for all young people
 - Providing all young people with the **proper financial and administrative support** to fully engage in this new action and allow travel vouchers to cover alternative methods of public transportation other than trains, particularly for young people coming from areas with low or no connection to the rail network;
 - Allowing participants to **participate for a longer period than their 18th birthday year**, taking into account their life plans;
 - Promoting the development, together with civil society, including youth organisations, of an **online and offline support network at European level for participants** travelling under DiscoverEU.
 - Ensuring that DiscoverEU is available in all Erasmus programme and partners countries.
- Fostering intercultural learning and European Identity
 - Including a **strong intercultural learning component** to the DiscoverEU action and incentivise participants to temporarily volunteer and/or work with local civil society organisations in the countries they visit and that it fully **contributes to the objectives of the Youth Chapter of the Erasmus+ successor programme (and of the programme as whole)**.
- Investment in a stronger Youth Sector in Europe
 - Ensuring that **investment in Discover =EU does not take away vital resources** from other important parts of the Youth Chapter.
- A new action for young people by young people
 - Include **youth organisations as key partners** in the design, management and implementation of DiscoverEU.

¹ The Position is based on the expertise provided by the members of the European Youth Forum Expert Group on Erasmus+ and Funding for youth organisations, feedback from Board discussions on the topic as well as from various inputs from the membership of the European Youth Forum.

² European Youth Forum - Policy Paper on the Erasmus+ successor programme - 2017 <https://www.youthforum.org/policy-paper-erasmus-successor-programme>

The European Youth Forum proposes that DiscoverEU focuses on using the potential of short-term mobility to incentivise young people to become more involved in civil society movements, particularly youth organisations.

DiscoverEU should then still keep its focus on first-time short-term mobilities for young people using sustainable methods of transportation. Participants could apply for a DiscoverEU mobility in two different ways:

- 1) By submitting an individual or group travel itinerary to their National Agency of their country of residence through a simplified online application process; or
- 2) By applying to participate in a travel itinerary created by civil society organisations.

In both cases, participants would be invited to **travel** to different cities in at least 2 different countries and **volunteer** for at least a week in a hosting local organisation with a concrete topic binding the different volunteering experiences together (i.e. youth work development, environmental activism, work with refugees, etc.).

The sending and hosting organisations would be responsible for ensuring a **proper learning experience** for the participant, the **validation of the competences** acquired as well as the preparation, support and the post-travel follow-up with the participant. Participants would be incentivised to **pass by relevant cities such as European Youth Capitals, European Capitals of Culture or/and European Green Capitals**, for example, as part of their travel experience.

I. Institutional context

The new Erasmus programme regulation³, presented by the European Commission on 30th May 2018, has been received by the European Youth Forum as a promising start for discussions on the future of the programme.

The European Commission's proposal takes the right step to build on the continuity and experience of the previous programme, opting to improve the structure with new actions, a bigger budget and more possibilities for cross-sectoral approaches and synergies between Erasmus and other EU programmes. With this new programme, the European Commission has also set the very ambitious goal to reach out to 12 million young people by 2027 (three times more than the current target of 4 million for Erasmus+) and intends to reach this target by providing more funding to organisations, lower administrative requirements and new actions aimed at providing opportunities to young people at local and grassroots level.

One such new action is **DiscoverEU, a new Key Action 1 mobility programme, proposed under the Youth Chapter of the next Erasmus programme**. According to the Staff Working Document⁴ accompanying the proposal, **this action will offer 18 year olds the opportunity to have a first-time, short-term, individual or group experience travelling throughout Europe in the frame of an informal educational activity aimed at fostering their sense of belonging to the European Union and discovering its cultural diversity**. This action will be implemented by bodies (such as youth organisations, municipalities, cultural organisations, education and training institutions, etc.) identified by the Erasmus National Agencies and the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), which will be responsible for reaching out to young people (primarily coming from disadvantaged backgrounds), selecting the participants and provide them with traveling vouchers and different programmes of learning activities. **The European Commission already pre-allocated EUR 700 million to DiscoverEU, corresponding to a sizeable portion of the budget allocated to the Youth Chapter (23% of the total budget of the chapter)**.

This action is a direct follow-up of the European Parliament's own DiscoverEU pilot⁵ project which was launched in June 2018 with a budget of EUR 12 million. Building from the #FreeInterrail initiative⁶, the proposal has continuously gathered support from the main political groups at the European Parliament, and particularly from the President of the EPP Group Manfred Weber. The pilot project aims at providing 25.000 young people with Interrail tickets to travel around Europe by December 2018. At the time of writing, the first round of applications seemed very successful with more than 100.000 applications for only 15.000 tickets. A second round of applications will open in October 2018 for the remaining 10.000 tickets. This action also shares many similarities with another initiative of the European Commission called Move2Learn Learn2Move⁷, ran by DG MOVE with Erasmus+ financing during 2017, which aimed at providing 5.000 young people between 16 and 18 years old with travel tickets to visit another European country during their school year.

³ Regulation Proposal for the Erasmus programme 2021-2027

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1532446342346&uri=CELEX:52018PC0367>

⁴ Commission Staff Working Document - Regulation Proposal for the Erasmus programme 2021-2027

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1532446342346&uri=CELEX:52018SC0276>

⁵ https://europa.eu/youth/discovereu_en

⁶ <http://freeinterrail.eu/>

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/social/move2learnlearn2move_en

II. Analysis of the Proposal

Mobility for all, lifelong learning, volunteering, intercultural dialogue and learning to live together, and sustainable development should remain key guiding principles of the successor programme of the Erasmus+ programme. For 30 years, the Erasmus+ programme and its predecessors have provided 9 million young people with the opportunity to travel abroad, meet other young people, experience other cultures and learn how to be active and engaged citizens in diverse and democratic societies. We welcome the continuous commitment of the European Commission to the programme for the next Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 and the intention to further expand its outreach to even more young people through more funding, less bureaucracy and new formats such as the youth participation activities and DiscoverEU.

We recognise the potential that simplified actions such as DiscoverEU can have in terms of outreach to a more diverse group of young people, particularly to those who haven't yet had the opportunity to benefit from the programme. We have been calling for simpler and more flexible formats in the next Erasmus programme that would allow young people and youth organisations more freedom to create new projects and activities that would more closely match with their personal and organisational needs.

We also appreciate the focus of DiscoverEU in strengthening young people's awareness of the diversity of European identity and on reinforcing the engagement of young people with democratic institutions and the European project. Promoting active citizenship, ownership of shared values, participation in democratic life, and develop a sense of European identity should remain as key objectives of the Erasmus programme and we support the commitment of the European Commission in reinforcing this aspect in the next iteration of the programme.

Nevertheless, we remain concerned by many aspects of DiscoverEU, namely:

1. The inaccessibility of DiscoverEU to all young people, including from disadvantaged backgrounds;
2. The lack of involvement of young people and youth organisations in the development of the idea;
3. The impact on the overall budget of the next Youth Chapter of the Erasmus Programme; and
4. The capacity of DiscoverEU in its current form to achieve its stated goals.

Inaccessibility

Providing more mobility opportunities is not enough to reach out to all young people, especially ones from disadvantaged backgrounds. Supporting actions, such as providing **financial and administrative support to participants**, strong communication campaigns in partnership with local organisations and networks, and also ongoing support (i.e. through a network of hosting organisations or contact points for emergencies) are required, and can ensure that participants gain more from the experience if both are provided hand in hand. If

such supporting actions are not provided, this action will only benefit those who can already afford to travel.

In addition, as youth work, volunteering and non-formal education can be particularly effective in **reaching out to and engaging with disadvantaged young people**⁸, youth organisations will also need to be properly supported.

To make DiscoverEU accessible to all young people, **travel vouchers should cover alternative methods of public transportation other than trains**. Many potential participants live in regions which do not have train connections (such as islands or the outermost regions of European Union) or have very poor connections to the rail network and therefore could be excluded from participating if the travel voucher doesn't cover other forms of public transportation. Furthermore, as Europe - as an entity - is not confined to the borders of the European Union, **DiscoverEU should operate in all Erasmus programme and partners countries**, including the United Kingdom, depending on the outcomes of the Brexit negotiations⁹.

Following this logic, **the current age limit of 18 years old only is restrictive** and should be made more flexible in order to ensure that young people do not miss out on opportunities for travel and learning due to circumstances that they could not control (such as compulsory school attendance, visas, military service, etc.).

Accommodation and other costs related to travel should also be supported in order to make this action accessible to everyone regardless of their economic means. For example, participants could benefit from a "couchsurfing" network to find free accommodation during their travels or from a local support networks of volunteers willing to help participants with reduced mobility and/or other special needs to help them along their trip. Here, the involvement of civil society and especially youth organisations would be essential to create these support networks and ensure the quality of the support.

Not enough means to achieve its goals

Without proper measures to ensure intercultural dialogue and non-formal learning opportunities, travel does not necessarily guarantee intercultural learning or result in openness to other cultures and countries of Europe, hence fostering a shared sense of belonging to the European Union among participants.

An experience solely based on tourism is unlikely to have much intercultural learning impact and in fact, may even reinforce harmful cultural stereotypes, going against the main objective of the new action. To ensure that the proposal actually reaches its stated objectives, it is important to **involve organisations with experience in hosting youth exchanges and engaged in volunteering activities** in its design and implementation to ensure that meaningful intercultural learning experiences can be provided to participants.

⁸ Commission Staff Working Document - Impact Assessment - Regulation Proposal for the Erasmus programme 2021-2027

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018SC0277&from=EN>

⁹ European Youth Forum - Policy Paper on the Erasmus+ successor programme - 2017
<https://www.youthforum.org/policy-paper-erasmus-successor-programme>

Unjustified impact on the budget of the Youth Chapter

The **prioritisation of funds** for this new action in the next Youth Chapter of the Erasmus Programme is also of **concern**. As mentioned in the mid-term review of the Erasmus+ programme, the current Youth Chapter doesn't have adequate funding to properly fund the entirety of quality projects that it receives each year.

While the doubling of the overall budget of the Erasmus programme for the next Multiannual Financial Framework is a welcome step forwards in finding a solution for this issue, the pre-allocation of at least 23% of the budget of the next Youth Chapter (EUR 700 million out of EUR 3.1 billion) into a new action with no concrete results at the time of proposal is **unjustified**.

Experimentation with the Erasmus programme formula, while welcomed, cannot come at a cost of **diverting crucial resources away from proven successful parts of the Youth Chapter**. Priority for budget allocation should be given to formats which have already proven to be effective by reaching out to all young people and promoting even more projects and organisations to benefit from the programme.

No involvement of young people

For a new action with such a budgetary impact on the next Erasmus Youth Chapter, it is unacceptable that **no broader consultation of young people and of the youth sector was carried out** ahead of the publication of the European Commission proposal.

While the European Commission hosted a stakeholder meeting in May 2018 to present the idea, this meeting contributed very little to provide enough information on the rationale, the objectives, the budget and the implementation of DiscoverEU to the youth stakeholders to properly collect their feedback on the proposal.

The European Commission must take a more transparent and constructive approach and find better ways to involve youth stakeholders as experts and partners in the creation and design of this new initiative. A consultation process similar to the one that led to the creation of the new EU Youth Strategy could have been an alternative to know what young people and youth organisations would like to see in the next Youth Chapter of the Erasmus programme and the ideal space to present, debate, advocate for and enhance new actions such as DiscoverEU.

III. Our priorities for DiscoverEU

The following part outlines the four main priorities of the European Youth Forum for the DiscoverEU and its main political demands towards the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union -as well as all relevant stakeholders- for the development of this new action.

Priority One - Accessibility to all young people

We demand to:

- Ensure that **all participants have access to a proper support system** (such as offline pre- and post-travel support, financial, legal and administrative support, mentoring and validation of competences acquired). This support system should build upon the experience of the previous iterations of the Erasmus programme as well the experience of youth organisations in managing youth exchanges.
- Ensure that **young people with particular needs** (such as young people with physical or mental disabilities, care responsibilities, with refugee status, etc...) **receive specific support** that is tailored to their needs and a specific part of the DiscoverEU budget is allocated to promote their full participation. All relevant documents online should as well be available in a youth-friendly format and according to the standards established by the 2016 EU Web Accessibility Directive.
- Co-establish, in **partnership with a diverse range of organisations** and local and national stakeholders, a strong **communication campaign** to raise awareness about DiscoverEU and the Erasmus programme among young people, particularly aiming at **reaching those who haven't yet benefited** from the programme before.
- Promote the development, together with civil society, including youth organisations, of an **online and offline support network** at European level for participants travelling. This could take the shape of **'couchsurfing' networks for free accomodation** for participants, online communities providing useful tips and tricks for new participants, networks of volunteers to **support the mobility of young people with disabilities** or other actions relevant to **promote sustainable, safe and inclusive learning mobilities** through this action.
- Allow the travel vouchers to cover **alternative methods of public transportation** other than trains, particularly for young people coming from areas with low or no connection to the rail network and to encourage the use of **sustainable** methods of transportation.
- Allow participants to **participate for a longer period than their 18th birthday year**. Young people should have the chance to use the pass during a longer period of at least 2 years so as to ensure they are able to benefit from it at a time when it suits their life plans.
- Ensure that this action could benefit from the **synergies** that the next Erasmus programme wants to develop **with other EU programmes**, such as European Solidarity Corps and European Social Fund+.
- Facilitate a fast-track/simplified/preferential visa process for participants of DiscoverEU

Priority Two - Fostering intercultural learning and European identity

We demand to:

- Include a **strong intercultural learning component** to the new action. This could be achieved by including youth organisations and other civil society organisations as partners in the design and implementation of DiscoverEU. Synergies with national and European programmes focused on promoting free access to culture among young people (such as Creative Europe or national culture passes) should as well be explored.
- Ensure that there is a **reporting and feedback process to access and validate the competences acquired by the participants** during their DiscoverEU experience, for example through an adapted version of Youthpass or the Open Badges technology.
- Facilitate the **access of European networks organisations**. This would allow participants to benefit from the extensive network of these organisations to help them plan and organise their travel and benefit from their experience in hosting and managing youth exchanges, guaranteeing as well the quality of the experience.
- Incentivise participants to temporarily **volunteer and/or work with local civil society organisations in the countries they visit**. This would allow the participants to experience the diversity of civil society in Europe, understand what it means to be an European citizen in different contexts and contribute to build a better Europe. Links with actions financed under the European Solidarity Corps should be explored. Participants should as well be allowed to combine their DiscoverEU travel with participation in other Erasmus programme-funded projects.
- Ensure that the **current DiscoverEU pilot project is properly evaluated** and that the lessons learned are properly incorporated into the new DiscoverEU action, taking stock from this position. Particular attention should be given to evaluating whether the pilot project achieved its stated objectives of contributing to a greater sense of European identity among participants and if the action reached young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Priority Three - Investment in a stronger Youth Sector in Europe

We demand to:

- Ensure that **investment in DiscoverEU does not take away needed resources from other important parts of the Youth Chapter**. Unless major changes are made in the current format of DiscoverEU, priority for budget allocation should be given to formats which already proved to be effective reaching out to young people and to allow even more projects and organisations to benefit from the programme. **Investment in new actions should as well be combined with more investment in the Youth Chapter, up to 15% of the overall Erasmus programme.**
- Provide **financial support to civil society organisations** under this new action. Funding should be primarily directed in supporting the individual mobilities of

participants and the non-profit organisations that support them, and partnerships with for-profit actors should be properly assessed in line with the objectives of the action.

Priority Four - A new action for young people by young people

We demand to:

- Start a **youth consultation process** focused on the DiscoverEU, similar to the one that led to the creation of the new EU Youth Strategy, in order to collect feedback from young people and youth organisations ahead of the publication of the programme guidelines for the next Erasmus programme. The ongoing Structured Dialogue process could be a starting point for this consultation.
- Establish a **consultative body of youth organisations to provide input on the design, monitoring and implementation of all actions under the next Erasmus programme**. This could be best done by including the European Youth Forum as a permanent observer without voting rights in the Youth Programme Committee.
- Include **youth organisations as key partners** in the implementation of this action, with proper financial and administrative support for reaching out to all young people and provide them with the support necessary to fully engage in this new action.

IV. DiscoverEU for all - The ideal scenario

The next Erasmus Programme must have the much wider objective of promoting the overall personal development of young people as active citizens in diverse and democratic societies¹⁰. With this new DiscoverEU action, there is an opportunity to reinforce this dimension in the next programme by having a specific mobility action dedicated to introducing young people to the diversity of civil society in Europe and providing them with the tools to become more engaged, more aware of their rights and more prepared to give their contribution to the European project.

In this context, **the European Youth Forum proposes that the new action focuses on using the potential of short-term mobility to incentivise young people to become more involved in civil society movements, particularly youth organisations**, and echoing the priorities listed above.

DiscoverEU would still keep its focus on first-time short-term mobilities (2 weeks to 1 month) for young people (between 18 and 21 years old) using sustainable methods of transportation (by train in principle, but other methods of transportation should be available for young people from peripheral regions¹¹ or with special needs). Participants could apply for a DiscoverEU mobility in two different ways:

- By submitting an individual or group travel itinerary to the Erasmus National Agency of their country of residence through a simplified online application process:

Participants (applying individually or in a group), would **submit an itinerary** describing which cities and which **countries they would visit** (minimum 2 countries), the list of **organisations they wish to volunteer with**, the estimated **length of their travel**, their estimated **budget**, and an explanation of the **topic** they would like to explore (e.g. learn more about environmental activism in Europe, about civil society movements working with refugees, about how organisations are working with the Sustainable Development Goals, etc.).

Similar to the solidarity placements under the European Solidarity Corps, the applying participants would have the possibility to designate an **organisation as their sponsor** and this organisation would be tasked to help them with their application, travel arrangements, pre- and post-travel support and the validation of competencies acquired during their mobility.

- By applying to participate in a travel itinerary created by civil society organisations:

For **organisations**, they would **submit travel itineraries for individual or group mobilities** in which participants would be invited to travel to different cities in at least 2 different countries and volunteer for at least a week in a hosting local organisation. The travel itineraries would need to have a **topic** bringing the different volunteering

¹⁰ <https://www.youthforum.org/policy-paper-erasmus-successor-programme>

¹¹ With the same geographical scope as the overall Erasmus programme

experiences together (e.g. intergenerational dialogue, participate to summer camps in other countries, short placement for apprenticeships). The sending and hosting organisations would be responsible for **ensuring a proper learning experience** for the participants, the **validation of the competences** acquired as well as the preparation, support and the post-travel follow-up with the participants.

In both cases, the criteria for selection should favour participants and organisations who submit itineraries focused on **learning** more about youth activism, the role of civil society in Europe and contributing to the objectives of the Erasmus programme, in which **volunteering** in local organisations is a strong component and/or passing through relevant cities such as European Youth Capitals, European Capitals of Culture, European Green Capitals, etc. Itineraries incorporating alternative and **sustainable** methods of transportation (such as bikes or green transports) or with specific measures to allow **young people with specific needs** to participate should as well be prioritised in the selection process.

As a general principle, itineraries by individuals or by local organisations should be submitted to Erasmus National Agencies of their country of residence. Itineraries submitted by European organisations and Networks should be managed by the Education, Culture and Audiovisual Executive Agency.