

Maroš Šefčovič —Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

Tearing down the walls: the future of mobility for Europe's youth

The Presidency Conference on Erasmus and the Mobility Green Paper

Opening session

Lund, 5 October 2009

Speech

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Dear Vice-Chancellor Dr. Åkesson,  
MP Ms. Sofia Larsen,  
Dear colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'm honoured to open this conference, my first one as the new European Commissioner with responsibility for Education and Culture. I am also pleased to be among so many of you who help shape higher education in your daily work.

I would like to thank our host, Lund University, which is actively engaged in Erasmus mobility and is part of the Erasmus programme's success story.

I would also like to thank the Swedish Presidency and the Swedish National Agency for co-organising this event with the Commission.

This conference addresses two major issues: how to take the Erasmus programme forward into the next decade and what to do to open up mobility opportunities for all young people.

The European Commission has framed the debate that we are having today and tomorrow; but we will be above all in listening mode.

We are here to consult you, to listen to your ideas, and take on board your best contributions to formulate our policies. This conference is about your programme and your future.

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Two years ago we celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Erasmus. Today, we will discuss the future of the Erasmus programme and – more generally – the move to increase and broaden the mobility of young people, inspired by the success of Erasmus.

There has been a lot of reflection on the benefits of learning mobility and how it could be expanded. The high-level expert forum set up by my predecessor Ján Figel' provided valuable input in the discussion when Ministers met late last year.

In that debate, the EU Member States clearly expressed themselves in favour of expanding mobility for all, a political recognition of the central place of mobility on the education agenda. This prompted us to draft the Green Paper on promoting learning mobility for all young Europeans.

Now the time is ripe to take this debate to the people. This is the rationale of this conference and, more in general, of the public consultation launched by our Green Paper.

Let me also remind you of another milestone we have agreed on this spring. The ministers of the 46 countries involved in the Bologna process set an ambitious pan-European benchmark:

at least 20% of students in higher education should have a study or training period abroad by 2020.

This is not unrealistic; certain countries (Austria and Germany) in Europe have already reached this target and are aiming even higher.

Our ambition to give a big impetus to mobility issues has received a major boost recently from President Barroso. He has thrown his weight behind expanding existing instruments like Erasmus into a new EU youth and mobility initiative, as part of the EU 2020 strategy.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

We all know Erasmus is the flagship programme of the entire Commission. But why exactly is it so successful?

I would like to reflect on this question and I will start off with a quote from an Erasmus student:

"I realised that the experience made a whole new person of me and that I would never look at the world and Europe – my home – like I did before".

I like this quote because it illustrates very well how Erasmus transforms individuals. Much of the feedback we get from former Erasmus students underlines that it has been a positive life changing experience – both professionally and personally.

In today's world, one's personal and professional success in life is all about having the right skills mix. I'm convinced that mobility programmes such as Erasmus are part of the answer to equipping people with the skills required in a complex world.

A recent evaluation of the programme showed us the extensive impact that the programme has had, not only on individuals, but also on institutions and on Europe's higher education systems in general.

Let me give you just two examples:

- today, universities across Europe make extensive use of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and
- they have been revolutionised by the reforms of the Bologna process; themselves inspired by Erasmus. You will hear more on its impact later this afternoon.

Over the years, the programme has managed to adapt to new needs, introducing teacher mobility, the Erasmus University Charter and the Student Charter, student placements in enterprises, and mobility of non-teaching staff. We have also reinforced the involvement of enterprises in higher education.

This is perhaps another reason behind the success of Erasmus; the programme is not cast in stone, rather it has been continuously improved and updated to keep pace with changes in higher education.

And to prove that we will never rest on our laurels, today we will present the details of the Commission's Green Paper on promoting the learning mobility of young people.

The Green Paper lays down our ideas on where the major areas for improvement could lie.

Mobility should not be a reserve of higher education; all young people should be given the chance of a learning or training experience abroad.

Your institutions and constituencies are invited to contribute to the consultation on the Green Paper. Your views are important for us as they will provide key input to drive forward mobility policy and programmes.

This is a chance for you to have your voices heard and get involved in EU policy-making.

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We can be proud of Erasmus' achievements and particularly today as we celebrate the two millionth Erasmus students.

And because Erasmus is a collective effort, I will present awards to 31 recent Erasmus students representing all participating countries.

The winners have been selected because they have brought home outstanding stories from their exchange periods abroad.

They also include brave students who've had to overcome particular difficulties such as a disability. I have a special word for you: congratulations for your courage and determination.

And there is more good news on this day of celebration: the monthly Erasmus grants for students are increasing; last academic year the average rose to about 250 euro.

This is a remarkable improvement compared to the past; but it's still not enough, particularly for students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Today and tomorrow we will discuss the challenges the programme is facing. Before the debate starts in earnest, let me give you my views on the matter.

I can see two main objectives for Erasmus – more and better mobility – and four major obstacles.

**First**, we need to substantially boost mobility numbers to better spread the benefits among students. Erasmus exchanges involve only 3 to 4% of Europe's student population.

Can we reach our target of 3 million Erasmus students by 2012? It will be a challenge. A growth rate of 8% would be needed.

We have seen that in 10 countries the number of outgoing students has decreased, sometimes by more than 10%. This is a worrying trend. Is the appetite for mobility declining? In addition, we have to address an imbalance between incoming and outgoing student numbers in many countries.

**Second**, the quality of mobility needs improvement as well. We do not deal with mobility for its own sake. Each mobility period must contribute to the development of the individuals involved and to improve the standards of Europe's higher education in general.

These are the broad objectives. What obstacles do we have to overcome to reach them?

- The first challenge, as usual, is money. Especially in these difficult times, governments need to resist the temptation to cut their budgets for schools, universities and research. The recession in fact requires greater investment; because research and education will take us out of the crisis sooner and in better shape.

And we will need a steep increase in resources at all levels if we are to finance our ambitious mobility agenda. I invite everybody – national, regional and local authorities, universities and other stakeholders – to join in on a concerted effort to support mobility.

- The second challenge is lack of language skills. We need a long-term investment into language learning and teaching – and a good and early preparation ahead of the mobility period.
- Third, quality of mobility and in particular a lack of recognition of periods spent abroad can be tackled by a stricter application of the Erasmus tools such as learning and training agreements, ECTS and Diploma Supplements. This is mainly a task for the educational institutions.
- Fourth, lack of information and motivation. A Eurobarometer survey this year indicated that 50% of Europe's students want to go abroad to learn. However, only a small portion actually takes that step. How can we reach out to these potential mobile students?

As you can see, there is room for improvement even in the flagship programme of the European Commission. Collectively we have to do more.

The High Level Forum on mobility set up at the start of 2008 has proposed a new partnership of all stakeholders – Member States, regions, universities and businesses – to make learning mobility an ordinary part of university education for all.

We must progressively eliminate barriers and expand opportunities for all learners within Europe and – why not? – worldwide.

This, I believe, is the context of our discussions today and tomorrow. I invite everyone to think big. Of course we need to find answers to our current challenges; but we should also look farther, to the years after 2013.

- Where do we want to take Erasmus, and mobility in general, over the next financial perspectives and programming period?
- How can we maximize the benefits from transnational mobility for students and staff?
- How can we reach out and involve other actors?

All these issues will be discussed more thoroughly in the workshops; I hope your debate will help us find the answers the next Commission needs to develop the programme.

I wish you a fruitful conference.

Thank you.