



ETUCE Statement on the European Commission's Green Paper

“Promoting the learning mobility of young people”

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Preliminary remarks

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The ETUCE supports the Commission's initiative on making learning mobility the rule rather than the exception for more young people in Europe. Learning mobility can potentially contribute to strengthening the education opportunities at all levels and sectors of the system. Moreover, increased mobility fosters a better understanding of cultural diversity across Europe and thus enables a sense of belonging for the individual citizen. In order to turn this potential into reality, the ETUCE considers two main challenges to have a significant impact on the promotion of learning mobility: a renewed focus on opportunities for financing and more opportunities and facilities for teacher mobility.

The European Trade Union Committee for Education represents 110 teachers' unions in the EU and EFTA countries and more than 5.5 million teachers from all levels of the education sector. As a European Social Partner in education at EU level, the ETUCE is a member of the ETCG. The ETUCE is also an autonomous organisation within the Education International Pan-European Structure.

The ETUCE agrees with the Commission's concern about the fact that only 0.3% of the people in the age between 16 and 29 were able to benefit from European mobility programmes in 2006. However, it should be underlined that these figures do not include all students, in particular they do not take account of those students who participate in mobility for learning purposes on their own initiative and who do not benefit from any European programme. It is ETUCE's opinion that all figures related to learning mobility should be considered when the issue is discussed. Moreover, the development of appropriate methods should equally base on all data available. It is even more important to recognise that an important amount of students in Europe make an extra effort to go abroad to learn in order to increase their employability and open their horizon. However, this is often done in very difficult social and economic conditions.

The overall numbers of mobile Europeans are however far too limited and this situation is even more worrying particularly because several measures have already been taken in order to ensure that a larger proportion of the population is able to experience a period of mobility abroad. The Green Paper of 2 October 1996 on “Education – Training –Research: the obstacles to transnational mobility” is only one initiative we could mention. More than 15 years after this initiative and even 30 years after initiating discussions at EU level on how to improve mobility among Europeans the situation has only slightly improved, and little has actually been achieved. What is even more unsatisfactory is that although the current situation in European universities proves that learning mobility is a growing trend, this is much less true for young people in vocational education and training, doing internships, work-based placements and apprenticeships.

1. The target group of the Green Paper

The Commission Green Paper concerns learning mobility at all learning levels and in all disciplines, while specifically focusing on the age group of 16 to 35 year olds. However, by including for examples teachers in this framework, the upper age limit would automatically become higher. ETUCE thus wonders about the appropriateness of the definition of the target group, while the Green Paper recognises that learning mobility could be beneficial for all age groups. ETUCE is additionally concerned with the definition of an age group, recognised as “young people”, which appears to be more worth to invest in. It should be vigorously stressed that such an age group definition stands deviated from the lifelong learning approach largely adopted in all EU and EFTA countries participating in Education and Training 2010 and 2020 processes today.

2. Promotion of and conditions for successful learning mobility of teachers

Considering this situation and what section 3.4 of the Green Paper underlines, there is an urgent need for engaging “multipliers” in promoting mobility amongst young people in Europe. Teachers and trainers are clearly identified as a key factor to motivate and stimulate young people for participation in this field. ETUCE however would like the Commission to find a more comprehensive language to define the role of teachers in this matter, which is linked to their natural key position in education and training in general. Their role is far more multifaceted than to only encourage young people to study abroad for a short period of time. Teachers have to demonstrate and assure quality in all aspects of their work. Teaching,

as a competence driven profession, also requires mobility as part of competence development needs.

It is also worth underlying that both the Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training and the recent Council Conclusions of 26 November 2009 on the professional development of teachers and school leaders recommend “the gradual expansion of mobility for teachers and trainers with a view to making periods of learning abroad the rule rather than the exception” and confirm that “teachers (...) are encouraged and enabled to take advantage of the opportunities offered by exchange and mobility schemes, and networks, at both national and international level”. In order to achieve the objectives set down in these Council recommendations and to have an impact on the member states commitments, it appears crucial to the ETUCE that figures, consequently EU benchmarks, are developed in the area of teachers’/student teachers’ mobility for learning purposes. However, when we talk about benchmarks and indicators to follow its actual achievement, it is of outmost importance to take into account data that presents the variety of today’s learning mobility situations - not only those funded via European programmes. The social and economic conditions which these mobility periods are organised in should also be made clearer.

Teachers as role models

By enriching the individual teacher’s knowledge and skills via a learning period spent abroad, it is the students who benefit from both the input in the teaching practices of their teacher and the positive example he/she represents. This goes not only for students’ learning but also for the development of youngsters’ personal attitudes towards others. Children are extremely sensitive to the existence of racism and discrimination and they are largely vulnerable to the effects of them. They need to grow accustomed to manoeuvring in international environments where acknowledgment of cultural diversity is allowed to flourish. It is only if teachers and student teachers have more opportunities to participate in learning mobility schemes and programmes that the full potential of their responsibility as role models will be reached.

Conditions to be met for increasing teacher’s learning mobility

ETUCE believes that the promotion of learning mobility on all levels for teachers and trainers furthermore requires relevant measures to be taken in the teaching profession. At the present moment, it is very difficult for working teachers to participate in mobility programmes. This is of great concern to the ETUCE as mobility is important for both the

professional work and career development of teachers. It is however challenging to ensure the possibilities of mobility both in teacher education programmes and in the education sector in general. Providing a qualified teacher replacement, ensuring a sound financial basis and portability of pension and security rights, recognising the experience periods abroad, maintaining a balanced teacher force are only some of the difficulties the education sector faces in the promotion of teacher mobility. Consequentially, teachers are obliged far too often to deal with heavy administrative obstacles to participate in mobility programmes.

It is ETUCE's opinion that support and information from employers in education is more than essential in helping teachers to become more mobile for learning purposes throughout their career. This support is indispensable both from the employer facilitating the mobility leave of their employee in the country of origin and the employer in the host country who welcomes the mobile worker in the school facilities for a period of learning mobility.

As addressed in the Green Paper, to overcome these challenges often requires immense personal investment, enthusiasm and commitment from teachers. The ETUCE agrees that this should be appreciated to a higher degree, while also taking into consideration the socio-economic situation of the individual teacher and the multitude of other roles a teacher plays. Participation in mobility is indeed subject not only to personal motivation by teachers to be part of such programmes, but also to the provision of proper conditions by employers, that is to say, time allocated to participate in mobility programmes, financing all expenses incurred during the period. The member states and the Commission need to address this issue with more close attention to pave the way for the administrative side of mobility programmes. Teachers from all learning contexts (not only language teachers), with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds should be offered the chance to broaden their knowledge on core subject. It should however be underlined that the level of learning mobility of teachers is less likely to reach the level of learning mobility of other professional groups, particularly because of the cultural and language barriers the teaching profession is more sensitive to.

Mobility of student teachers

ETUCE would like to see the Commission accentuating the need to develop means to strengthen mobility in initial teacher education with more emphasis. This is exactly the period when prospect teachers have a realistic option to benefit from a learning mobility period abroad. In addition, there is a stronger political will to enhance learning mobility

during education, than within working-life. The target group of the Green Paper clearly presents this trend.

Teacher education programmes are responsible for preparing future teachers to promote meaningful, engaged learning for every student or pupil, regardless of race, gender, ethnic heritage or cultural background. In order to successfully promote mobility of student teachers different options should be considered. In the opinion of the ETUCE, a European mapping of existing methods in the different countries of the EU should be conducted. It is of utmost importance however, that mobility is strengthened in initial teacher education and that all necessary conditions for student teachers to fully benefit from such options are met.

3. Addressing the need for new options on financing

The ETUCE strongly believes that significant additional resources are needed for the education systems in Europe in general. There is an urgent need to see greater public investments in the education sector. In the EU member states, current levels of investment are too low, with 7 countries spending just around 5% of their GDP on education and a total of 12 countries spending below 5%. The current financial crisis should not be an obstacle to this and neither should new programmes for mobility. It is not beneficial to move funds from one part of the sector to another, and therefore the member states and the EU should pay attention to distributing the inflow of investments equally to the entire sector¹.

A recent confirmation of this priority within the EU institutions are the latest key messages on Education and Training issued by the Council of the European Union (19 February 09, 6666/09), stating that “It is precisely in times of economic difficulty that the key strategic importance of sustaining open and efficient, high-quality education and training systems (...) must continued to be emphasised”. The ETUCE thus stresses that it should be clear that the need for financial support of mobility programmes should not be used as a justification to cut resources for education and research. As education is a fundamental human right for everyone, Member States furthermore hold a great responsibility to offer or facilitate equally public regulated funding to everyone. Public funding is, in the view of the ETUCE, a precondition for ensuring that all students have equal access to quality education and are

¹ See also the ETUCE special web page on the economic crisis on www.csee-efuce.org

provided with key competences for lifelong learning². We would therefore be careful with promoting increased privatisation of mobility programmes.

It is obvious, that to increase the amount of students participating in mobility programmes also requires an increase of workload for the administrative personnel, but also for teachers across Europe. It should therefore be carefully considered how the practical implications can be as efficient and smooth as possible without putting an unnecessary strain on the administration system and on teachers. EU Member States should therefore better commit themselves and allocate the required financial means for adjusting, promoting and administering mobility programmes.

A key challenge identified in the Commission Green Paper is the portability of grants and loans, section 1.5 of the Green Paper. The ETUCE agrees with this concern, but also directs attention to the fact that in countries such as the Netherlands, taking direct subsidies abroad has been enabled but also regulated. The Dutch system demands that the student, before taking a grant abroad, has lived three out of the last six years in the Netherlands. This is to prevent abuse of the portability arrangement by students who have no real connection with the country. The Commission, however, considers this to be contravening Community Law and therefore wishes to take the case to the European Court of Justice. This example shows that measures are being taken in some member states, but that different frameworks have been chosen. Respect for the various national frameworks is a challenge. The Member States should together with the Commission consider these different approaches which have the sole objective of facilitating and improving learning mobility opportunities across Europe.

Furthermore, in relation to the Bologna process (the Leuven declaration of April 2009) and to the Education and Training Process 2010/2020, the need for balanced mobility becomes obvious. One may notice that geographically balanced learning mobility across Europe is also of particular importance for enhancing the feeling of belonging to the European family and to support the development of active European citizenship. In relation to this, the ETUCE would like to stress that it is the quality of education institutions across Europe that is at the centre of the issue of imbalance observed in the mobility flows. Quality in all education institutions at all levels should be improved and national Governments should become far more proactive in promoting learning mobility within their own countries.

² Consult the ETUCE Statement on “Priorities for the new strategic framework for EU cooperation on education and training beyond 2010” for more information on this.