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ETUCE Statement

on the 30th Anniversary of the ERASMUS Exchange Programme

Adopted by the ETUCE Committee on 24 October 2017

The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) represents 131 education trade unions in 49 countries from all levels of the education sector, including educational personnel in higher education, academics and researchers. Following the year-long celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Erasmus exchange programme, announced by the European Commission in 2017, ETUCE hereby would like to express our views on the existing programme and to suggest ways to strengthen Erasmus in the future.

ETUCE considers the Erasmus exchange programme to be a successful programme in stimulating international cooperation in higher education in Europe and beyond. Constantly increasing the number of students studying abroad on Erasmus programmes,¹ as well as student evaluations,² clearly indicates that **the programme has been a success**. During the 30 years it has functioned, the Erasmus exchange programme has led to valuable student exchanges and has created prosperous global partnerships between higher education institutions, research organisations and stakeholders.

ETUCE particularly emphasises the **value of the internationalisation of higher education** which is promoted by such European initiatives as the Erasmus exchange programme. This type of internationalisation contributes to improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, enhances international cooperation and the capacity building of higher education institutions and research organisations, and increases students' engagement with global issues and their acceptance of cultural diversity. The success of the Erasmus exchange programme provides the basis for a future integrated strategy for the internationalisation in higher education.

ETUCE also notes the positive effect of studying abroad in the Erasmus programme on **the employability of mobile students**. ETUCE welcomes that the Erasmus exchange programme successfully contributes to students' personal development, as well as to their employability. According to the European Commission's *Erasmus Impact Study*, the unemployment rate of mobile students is 23% lower than of non-mobile students, and Erasmus students have better labour market skills after studying abroad than 70% of all students.³

¹ According to the European Commission's statistics, the number of Erasmus students increased from 3 244 students from 11 countries in 1987 to 3.3 million students from 34 countries in academic year 2013-2014 (http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/statistics/erasmus-plus-facts-figures_en.pdf).

² According to Erasmus Student Network Survey 2014, Erasmus students' rate for satisfaction with their stay abroad rose up to 4.4 on a scale from 1 to 5 (<https://esn.org/ESNSurvey/2014>).

³ *The Erasmus Impact Study: Effects of mobility on the skills and employability of students and the internationalisation of higher education institutions*. European Commission, DG Education and Culture, 2014.

ETUCE calls on the European Commission to make the Erasmus programme **as inclusive as possible**. Currently, the statistics show that majority of mobile students come from privileged socio-economic and academic family backgrounds.⁴ The insufficiency of Erasmus grants provided for studying abroad and the high costs of living in another country are mentioned by 63% of non-mobile students in 2016 as the main obstacles to participating in Erasmus exchange programmes.⁵ Hence, the programme's limited financial support contributes to a larger gap between students from privileged socio-economic backgrounds and students from less privileged backgrounds. ETUCE reminds the European Commission that quality higher education is not a commodity and should be accessible by all. Moreover, education is key to promoting common European values, fostering social integration and a sense of belonging to the community, enhancing intercultural understanding and preventing radicalisation. Therefore, we urge the European Commission to **increase financial assistance to Erasmus students** in order to provide people from disadvantaged backgrounds, including newly arrived migrants, with more opportunities to access quality higher education and to promote their inclusion in society.

While fully supporting and welcoming the success that the Erasmus programme has achieved in promoting international cooperation and learning mobility in higher education, ETUCE is concerned about the **excessively business-centred approach** of the programme, particularly under the Erasmus+ Programme. We believe that higher education and research are public goods and should be protected from the kind of internationalisation which aims to marketise universities and generate competition between them. For this reason, ETUCE strongly opposed the European Commission's proposal in 2014 to establish *Erasmus loans for students to attend Master courses abroad*⁶. These loans may contribute to the indebtedness of students and the exclusion of working-class and socio-economically disadvantaged students.

One of ETUCE's main concerns is that some university programmes are designed in the way that they do not allow students taking the time to do their studies abroad. Another serious worry for Erasmus students in almost all countries is the **recognition of their credits and grades** obtained while studying abroad. On the one hand, ETUCE is concerned that problems with credit recognition lead to delayed graduations and additional costs via accumulated student loans, tuition fees and postponed earnings. On the other hand, safeguards are needed to guarantee that issues relating to national language and culture do not get lost in the process of developing faster and more flexible systems of recognition. Therefore, ETUCE calls on higher education institutions to ensure that academic staff are properly involved in discussions on any changes to credit transfer and quality assurance mechanisms.

As a defender of teachers' interests, ETUCE is deeply concerned about **the working conditions of the teachers** who work with Erasmus students: teaching international students can be challenging and time-consuming (as they often have a different academic background), and requires additional language skills and cultural awareness from university staff. ETUCE urges the European Commission to pay more attention to building a supportive environment for teachers and educational personnel and to the social dimension of teaching and learning of exchange students. We advocate for additional financial support and sufficient continuous professional development (including obtaining foreign language

⁴ *The Erasmus Impact Study* (2014) stated that almost two thirds of students had at least one parent working as executive, professional or technician.

⁵ *What are the obstacles to student mobility during the decision and planning phase?* Intelligence brief No. 02 (2016).

http://www.eurostudent.eu/download_files/documents/EV_IB_mobility_obstacles.pdf

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus/files/library/erasmus-plus-master-loan_en.pdf

skills) to be provided for academic staff and researchers who teach international students. Without highly valued and skilled teachers, Erasmus programmes would not be able to ensure a high quality educational experience abroad.

Finally, we note that under the current Erasmus+ programme, teachers and other educational personnel can also participate in institutional exchanges between countries. However, various challenges prevent teachers from participating in such mobility programmes, for example insufficient grants, difficulties in finding temporary replacements at their education institution, language barriers, etc. Therefore, we urge the European Commission to provide more support to enable teachers to participate in the Erasmus+ programme.