



## European Youth Policies: A Qualitative Investigation of Erasmus+ Mobilities and European Solidarity Corps

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### Abstract

Youth policy is becoming an increasingly important area of focus within the European Union, especially because youth face ongoing challenges related to employment, education, participation or inclusion. In this context, the European Youth Strategy 2019–2027 represents a key framework designed to support young people. By examining this strategy and its implementation through various programmes, this research aims to contribute to the broader discussion on the effectiveness of youth-oriented policies in the European context. Furthermore, this paper aims to investigate how these strategies are experienced by young people, especially in current contexts, trying to discover the needs and expectations of young people. The research is based on a qualitative approach, combining policy analysis with primary data collected online from participants in programs such as Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps. The findings reveal that while the strategy aspires to foster equal opportunities and empower youth through mobility and civic engagement, participants often face practical obstacles that limit their ability to fully benefit from these opportunities.

**Keywords:** *Erasmus+; European Solidarity Corps, motivation, barriers, inclusion.*



## INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the United Nations, the definition of youth is based on acknowledging the period of transition between childhood and adulthood, thus making this category rather fluid when it comes to age. Due to the need for an exact age limit for statistical and policy-making circumstances, the United Nations puts people between the ages of 15-24 years as being part of the youth category [1]. However, this age has not been established as the sole one and the Secretary-General agrees upon the variations of the youth definition in different societies and Member States. Therefore, according to the Reinforced Youth Guarantee, the age group was broadened to 15-29 years, with attention to be applied for all young people in the European Union (EU) below the age of 30 [2]. In accordance with the communication from the European Commission, the youth population of Europe is projected to represent only 15.3% of the total population in Europe by 2050, while in 2009 at the time of the report, the percentage was 19.3% [3]. Therefore, it is such facts and general known truths that show the importance of youth and the gains from supporting youth policies aimed at the development and well-being of the young European generation, together with the precarious situation of this age.

The legal basis for youth policy can be found in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), most precisely in Articles 165 and 166, highlighting the fact that youth is a policy area for Member States individually, with the European Union playing only a supporting role [4]. In this case, without having competences that are mandatory, the EU is only able to support, coordinate or complement the action of each Member State, which in turn leads to no necessity in harmonizing legally binding acts across the union or laws and regulations of all Member States. Therefore, under the Juncker Commission, at the end of 2019, it was stated that youth unemployment has decreased, being only at 14.2% in September 2019, as compared to the peak of 24% in 2013, and then 18% in 2016 [5]. As a result, it was crucial to invest more in young people because this meant investment in human capital and the future of Europe. Thus, there are two proposals that are worth mentioning due to the value they bring for an individual: the launch of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC) and the continuation of the Erasmus program.

The European Commission's proposal for the launch of European Solidarity Corps was in May 2017, with it being in force starting October 2018. The aim of this initiative was to give young people (defined within the age group of 18-30 years old) the opportunity to contribute to European society by gaining new skills and experience. Based on the information presented by the European Commission, the concrete achievements of the ESC in facts and figures are: more than 886,000 young people expressed their interest in joining by registering since 2021; more than 50% of participants involved in the program since its launch were young people coming from a background with fewer opportunities; more than 90,000 opportunities for European youth were created under ESC since 2021 [6]. Moreover, the EU's core programme in supporting education, training, youth and sport in Europe is the Erasmus+ programme (which started back in 1987 as simply Erasmus programme focused only on higher education) [7]. The 2025 Erasmus+ report shows that "since 1987, the programme has given over 16 million people of all ages a chance to live and learn in another country in or outside the EU" [8]. Among all the mobility projects of the Erasmus+, the most widely known are student mobilities. Hence, "with more than 367,100 participants and the highest budget, higher education learners represent the majority of participants who carried out a learning mobility period in 2023, followed by group mobility in schools (about 222,000 pupils) and Vocational Education and Training (about 204,000 learners)" [9].

The Erasmus+ is now more competitive than before, with a total of 26.2 billion Euros as its estimated budget, which represents almost double the amount it had during the previous



2014-2020 years. Out of the complete budget, an estimated 70% will be used in supporting opportunities for all based on the lifelong learning principle, while the rest of 30% will be invested in projects for cooperation and policy development activities. For the mobility opportunities that represent the core of this program, the number of expected participants is 10 million individuals that shall gain from this outcome, especially in terms of employability and active social participation and inclusion [10]. As for the support in developing and cooperating for youth policies, this aspect will be taken at both European and national level in order to contribute to reforms in the further modernization and development of the components of a youth policy – education, training, youth and sport.

However, reports also include data about Erasmus+ youth respondents facing barriers to fulfil own potential. Thus, the Ray Transnational dataset from 2024 shows that 43.6% of participants of youth projects were facing barriers, while 24.7% of them experienced discrimination [11].

Starting from these grounds, this paper aims to investigate the EU youth strategies and how they are experienced by young people, especially in current contexts, trying to answer to the following questions: ‘What is the motivation of youth in getting involved with such a project?; Is the European Youth Strategy addressing the needs and expectations of young people, as seen through the lens of youth mobility programs such as Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps?; How does participation in these programs influence the development of students’ academic and social skills, and what suggestions do participants have for improving such programs?’.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

As indicated in literature, youth is an evolving concept, its terminology developing over time, being used to denote a person or a part of the life course [12], the study of youth playing a central role in psychology, anthropology, sociology, economy or law. Thus, there is a vast interdisciplinary approach in the study of youth, that introduces new issues that arise under various economic, political, and cultural conditions, these studies being concerned not only with youth as a social category but also as a specific stage of human development [13-15]. The complexity of ‘youth’ derives from literature, the authors emphasizing that, in trying to understand different concepts, such as citizenship, “when applied to young people, the content of citizenship has to be broadened, and the global perspective also has to be considered” [16]. There are studies [17-18] that analyzed youth from the perspective of well-being and life satisfaction, while other studies [19-21] analyzed the participation of youth in socio-political issues and the critical role of young people in decision-making process, or more precisely in peacebuilding. With regard to youth mobility, King et. all. focused on international youth mobility and life transitions, proposing theoretical perspectives through which youth mobility can be interpreted, discussing the determinants of such mobilities and analyzing student international mobility from various perspectives, such as process, product, and mechanism, highlighting as a policy gap the fact that European policies for integrating young people with transnational mobility are underdeveloped [22]. In 2015, Pásztor advocated for a holistic approach to student mobility in a study on international mobility among doctoral students, emphasizing the need to consider not only individual choice but also the impact of policies and funding, which are intertwined with individual motivations [23]. Other studies explored the motivations and meanings of student mobility, highlighting that decisions to participate in mobility are influenced by the social, cultural and economic context, while student mobility means more than the acquisition of formal knowledge; it also involves social and cultural knowledge that cannot be replicated in the home country [24-27]. A study outlining the potential benefits of the Erasmus program, based on a systematic review of the literature, can



be found in the work of Nikolac et al. [28]; the results indicate that such programs influence, among other things, personal development, deepen knowledge and skills, and strengthen participants' prospects in the labor market.

Contrastingly, there are few studies on the development of youth policies. Such policies, at European level, started to gain weight due to the involvement of the European Commission and the Council of Europe, especially since 2001, when a White Paper was issued on this matter [29]. This White Paper showcases the importance of an active collaboration with young people in policy fields that are also impacting them directly, with the European Commission outlining this process of consultation. Moreover, the document also stresses the awareness that the EU belongs to all its citizens, especially the younger generation who shall shape its future and, therefore, it should listen to the needs of these actors. On top of that, there was also an acknowledgement upon the importance of youth back in 2001, with the then upcoming waves of new Members States, which highlighted the importance in fostering and stimulating both national and European standards for the creation of common values and ideas to further drive cooperation, equality and a sense of belonging [30].

A study that explored the European Union Youth Strategy and criticized the way in which this strategy “has consolidated ‘a relation of cruel optimism’ when what is desired, in this case more education, has become an obstacle to human flourishing”, has been published in 2014. The authors concluded that “until Europe adopts a policy model which understands how modern economies work and the proper role education can play, young Europeans will be martyrs to the effects of the ‘cruel optimism’ which the ‘active society’ model has sustained for several generations” [31].

However, some argued that “youth participation strengthens personal and social development, provides expertise for children and youth programs and services, and promotes a more democratic society” [32].

Hence, starting with the necessity to integrate young people into the decision-making process of the EU, slowly but surely, other initiatives took shape over time, initiatives that were meant to point out and help young generations in being more vocal. It is worth noting that the Structured Dialogue, known as the EU Youth Dialogue, was created as a bridge between young people across the EU and decision-makers to be an active part in the European policy-making processes regarding youth. According to the European Youth Forum [33] – a platform of youth organizations in Europe – each Dialogue lasts 18 months and its focus is on one specific theme set by the Council of Youth Ministers, with 10 cycles taking places in total so far. The Trio Presidency of the European Council has a leading role in how youth actions and policies of the EU Youth Dialogue are implemented, together with the European Commission and other youth societies, among them the European Youth Forum. During the 6<sup>th</sup> cycle of the EU Youth Dialogues in 2017-2018, the EUYS was created, together with 11 European Youth Goals that are the reflection of the vision young people want in the EU [34]. The current initiative revolves around three main areas that are summarized by the words Engage, Connect, and Empower, therefore contributing to the strengthening of the youth sector together with youth policies. According to the paper “European Youth Strategies - A reflection and analysis”, made through a partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth, the three keywords represent the following: the word ‘Engage’ is linked to the active participation of youth in society, further on the word ‘Connect’ is about the existing opportunities via various exchange mobilities and their impact, and, lastly the word ‘Empower’ is about offering the necessary resources to young people to prepare them for their own lives and future [35].



Based on the findings, we considered it important to highlight, through this study, the perception of young people regarding EU youth strategies and programmes, providing input to the qualitative evaluation of such programs and adding depth that surveys cannot capture.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed qualitative research design, combining policy analysis with primary data collected through questions targeting participants of Erasmus+ and ESC programs, with the aim of exploring participants' experiences and perspectives regarding these programs. The analysis begins by outlining general respondent data and their level of participation in these EU programs and then explores the perceived impact of participation, focusing on the EUYS priorities. The final section analyses participant feedback and suggestions for improvement, offering insights into how current programs can be adapted to better meet the needs of Europe's youth, especially nowadays.

Data was collected via Google Forms, asking respondents to answer the open-ended questions distributed during the months of March and April 2025, allowing respondents to elaborate on their experiences, perceptions, and suggestions in their own words. Participants, within the age limits of 15 to 29, were recruited using snowball sampling, as initial respondents were asked to share the survey with other eligible individuals who participated in the program. Such approach facilitated access to participants with relevant experience. In the end, 62 participants met the study's eligibility criteria (based on age and country of residence). Participation was voluntary, and respondents provided their answers anonymously. All the answers have been processed according to EU Data protection regulations, with all the responses kept strictly confidential. All data collected was used solely for this research, with ensured anonymity, preventing any unauthorized access or disclosure.

We used thematic analysis which offered us a structured but flexible framework in which data were segmented and categorized to identify the most important concepts. Based on respondents' answers we generated codes as labels that capture significant features in relation to the research questions, and then we grouped the codes into large themes. Thus, we looked for patterns in the respondents' personal experiences by coding data, and then, the themes were constructed by examining constructs that occur in the data. For example, we assigned codes such as skill building, cultural interest, or professional development, and then grouped similar codes into broader themes, such as motivation for participation. Finally, the conceptual model highlighted the relationship between the respondents' motivation to participate in such programs – which would influence their decision to apply –, their experience during the application process, and their experience abroad, along with the challenges and subsequent outcomes of that experience, which would form the basis for the final suggestions and proposals. To analyze the data systematically, we used the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke [36], following the steps of familiarization with the data, organizing the codes effectively while ensuring that all relevant data items are coded, examining the codes and grouping similar codes into broader themes within the dataset, revising themes in order to ensure accurate representation, defining and naming themes, and finally drafting the report.

Therefore, this paper presents a study targeting individuals who had previously participated in the programs under investigation, Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, by addressing them questions related to sociodemographic characteristics (sex, age, country of residence, current status), to the participation in the investigated programmes, the impact of participation (EUYS Priority: Engage and Empower), accessibility and inclusion (EUYS Priority: Connect), individual feedback and proposals for improvement. With the help of this study, we aimed to find out the barriers to accessibility and inclusion experienced by participants, if applicable. We were also interested in feedback on how these programs can be



improved to better align with the EUYS priorities, current global and European context, as well as the needs of the participants.

## FINDINGS

Looking at the socio-demographic characteristics, the highest number of our respondents are of ages 23 and 26, followed by 25 and 27 years old, while based on gender, the highest number is female. The country of residency of the participants is a very diverse chart comprising a total of 14 different countries. Most respondents come from Romania (24 people) and Germany (15 people), followed by France, Italy, and Spain, with three or four respondents each. Belgium, Portugal, Sweden, and Turkey each have two respondents, followed by Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Serbia, and Slovenia with one respondent per country. The geographical distribution of participants may have implications for the diversity of program implementation approaches. The absence of participants from other countries means that not all national implementation models are included in the study and that not all challenges encountered at the national level are taken into account.

Moving on to the section related to participation in Erasmus+ or ESC, 55 out of the 62 respondents took part in an Erasmus+ project, while only 28 out of the 62 people had an ESC project. Regarding Erasmus+, we see a broad diversity of projects, with most respondents having had a study abroad opportunity or a youth exchange. Internships and training courses were also attended, with one respondent stating that they are also managing Erasmus+ cooperations now. Regarding ESC, there are only 31 responses with the majority doing volunteering within the ESC framework, followed by four respondents doing solidarity projects and one respondent each doing a traineeship and humanitarian aid.

When it comes to the motivation behind getting involved with a project, nearly all participants mentioned that the main reasons were cultural exchange, career development or skill-building, with some adding interesting responses such as burn out from work or a break after studies and before starting real work, which can be explained as a change of pace. Moreover, there is one respondent specifically stating language learning, another one mentioning learning about another country that could be transposed to cultural exchange, and a response about moving abroad. About half of the respondents discovered these programs via school/university, some of them found out about this opportunity from friends or family and few participants came across it through social media, EU institutions, or by simply stumbling across it online.

To assess the Engage and Empower dimensions of EU Youth Strategy, one section examined the perceived benefits and how taking part in Erasmus+ or ESC has influenced participants' personal growth, skills development, civic engagement, and future opportunities, and explored the perceived accessibility and inclusiveness of the programs, focusing on whether the participants felt supported and represented. When asked about the specific skills developed through their Erasmus+ or ESC experience, most respondents highlighted foreign language skills and teamwork. Some respondents mentioned leadership skills development and digital skills. In addition to these areas, a wide range of responses were noted, including adaptability, academic skills, sustainability knowledge, creative thinking, communication, and personal growth. These results suggest that while certain key competencies are consistently considered, the programs also enable diverse and personalized skill development depending on everyone's context, as well as what they are specifically looking to develop.

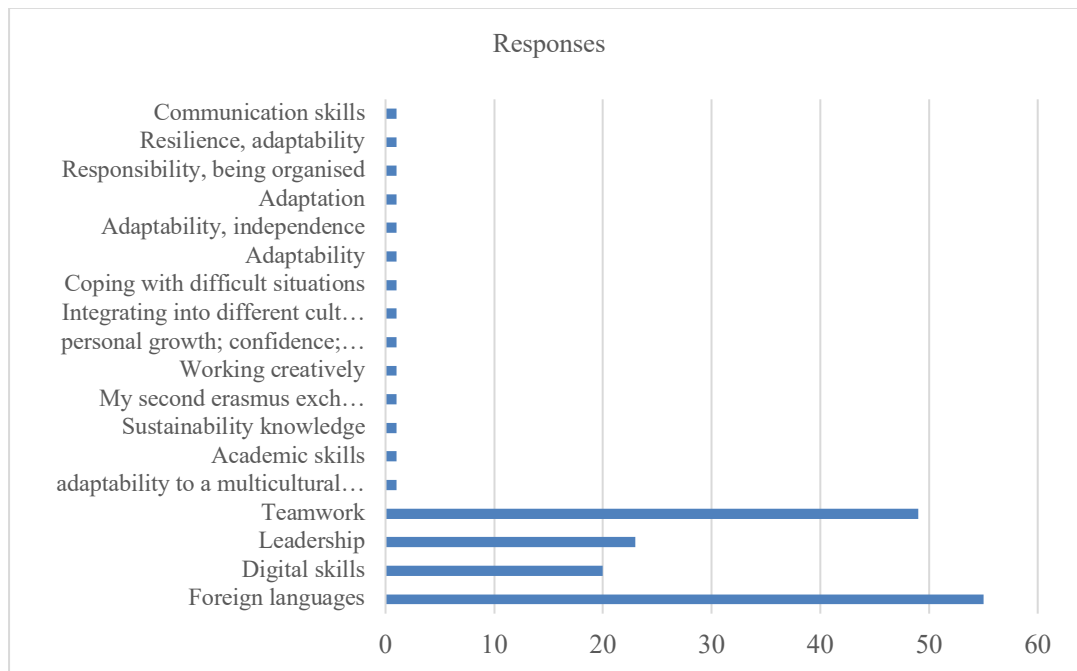


Fig. 1. What specific skills did you develop through your experience?  
Source: Respondents' answers

Regarding specific skills acquired by respondents, it seems that they developed a wide range of skills, most notably foreign language improvements, teamwork, leadership, digital competencies, and intercultural understanding. These skills were developed through immersive and practical experiences during their Erasmus+ or ESC opportunities. Many learned new languages or improved existing ones by interacting daily with locals, working with children, or attending language classes, with some progressing from beginner to intermediate levels, learning from zero enough to get by for daily activities, or achieving fluency and more confidence. Teamwork and leadership were often mentioned together and cultivated through group projects, volunteering, and coordinating tasks during events or workshops, often in multicultural settings that required effective communication and adaptability in the environment and within the team. Some participants highlighted digital skill development through tasks like social media management, video editing, and online learning, particularly during the pandemic, showcasing how these programs were successful despite such setbacks. Others mentioned academic challenges, like participating in university group projects or handling administrative procedures.

Among notable answers, one respondent shares how living abroad during the Erasmus exchange significantly improved her foreign language proficiency through daily practice and academic interactions. Other respondents described developing digital and teamwork skills by collaborating with other international people, overcoming language barrier challenges and different working styles. As one respondent noted, “being in a foreign country pushed me to practice daily, improving fluency and confidence”, therefore underlying that discussions and everyday interactions, working with various software tools for research, presentations, and communication significantly enhancing proficiency in speaking foreign languages. Another respondent highlighted how living abroad fostered personal growth by challenging their cultural perceptions and encouraging adaptability and openness to new perspectives, highlighting that “moving to a different country [...] you realize that your own perception of things is just your own and other cultures have a different say on that”. Lastly, another respondent shared that living abroad for the first time away from family, even during the

pandemic, significantly contributed to her personal growth, enhancing communication skills and adaptability in professional settings: “It was the best experience of university life. Although it was a bit unfortunate that it coincided with the pandemic period, it was still invaluable for my personal growth, allowing me to observe people from different cultures and build connections with them”. Overall, the responses demonstrate that these programs provided personal and professional growth, helping participants become more confident, adaptable, and open-minded in diverse environments and situations. These findings suggest a positive impact on human capital. The acquisition of knowledge and skills indicates that such programs contribute to the development of new personal and professional competencies. This can lead to better integration into the labor market and personal growth. Respondents’ answers reflect the development of intercultural skills, which can foster an attitude of openness and understanding of diversity – skills needed in a global context. Furthermore, new networks can have an impact on social capital, as the relationships developed within these programs can create future opportunities for professional or personal development, thereby extending the programs’ outcomes.

Another question aimed to assess participants' perceptions of the program’s ability to tackle key challenges faced by today's youth, such as unemployment, social exclusion, and mental well-being. As shown in the chart below, the majority of respondents view the program as highly relevant, with a strong leaning towards positive ratings. This distribution shows that most participants rated the program as very to totally relevant, indicating strong confidence in its impact. Only few participants viewed it as slightly relevant, and none saw it as completely irrelevant. This suggests that participants largely recognize the program’s contributions to addressing youth-related issues, especially based on their own opportunity.

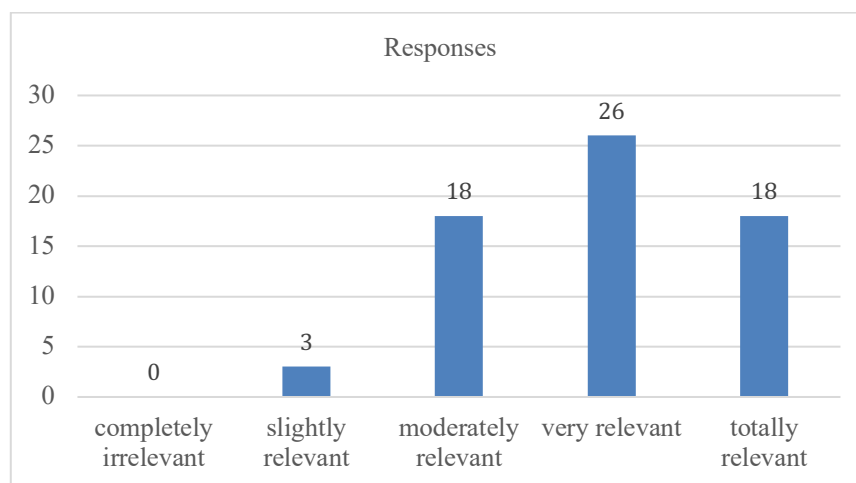


Fig. 2. How relevant do you think the program is in addressing current youth challenges?  
Source: Respondents’ answers

To examine the accessibility and inclusion dimension (EUYS Priority: Connect), one section included in our study was about accessibility and inclusion, by asking the participants how accessible the application process was. Most participants found the application process relatively easy, some participants rated the process as moderately easy, and only a small number of respondents reported difficulties. These results indicate that most respondents had a positive experience with the accessibility of the application process. When asked about specific barriers in the application process, if applicable, the most frequently reported barrier among respondents was bureaucratic difficulties, cited by about half of participants, highlighting ongoing administrative challenges in accessing these opportunities. Some participants mentioned that lack of information represented a barrier for them, suggesting a



need for clearer guidance and communication throughout the application process. Financial constraints were also a concern for a small number of participants, while language barriers affected few participants. A few participants mentioned individual or unique challenges, such as geographic remoteness, limited communication from hosting organizations, or delays in receiving admission confirmation, which further illustrates the importance of strengthening support structures and improving transparency in both programs.

The opinions on accessibility of these programs, regardless of background, disability, or financial situation, varied widely. The most frequently mentioned challenge was the financial aspect. Most participants noted that while there is some funding support, it often does not cover all necessary expenses, especially in countries with a high cost of living. Several respondents shared that the monthly allowance only covered basic needs, leaving no room for savings or personal development activities. It was mentioned the fact that the Erasmus funds are paid a month after the start of the exchange, which may be difficult for some participants. As one respondent mentioned, “barriers still exist in terms of affordability, accessibility for those with disabilities, and outreach to marginalized communities”. Thus, the programs are not accessible to youth from lower-income families in the way that their participation would involve a struggle to access such programs due to costs, while those with disabilities may face physical or digital barriers that limit their participation. On top of that, several responses brought attention to inadequate accommodation for people with disabilities. There were mentions of housing without elevators and universities lacking ramps or accessible lecture spaces. One participant noted that “there is no ramp at my university for possible students with walking disability to go up the stairs”. Another pointed out that, while in theory they are inclusive, many programs fail to consider practical accessibility, making participation difficult for youth with physical or mental health challenges. These results point to a structural inequality in terms of accessibility. In theory, these programs are open to everyone, but in practice, they are more accessible to those who enjoy financial stability and can cope with financial challenges, especially at the beginning of the program. Therefore, access to such programs is determined not only by formal eligibility criteria but also by the ability to bear certain financial costs. Financial constraints will act as a barrier that disadvantages the vulnerable, which may lead to the perpetuation of existing inequalities. From the perspective of public policy analysis, another interpretive perspective concerns the impact on program participation and outcomes. Financial barriers can lead to selective participation, meaning that program outcomes may reflect the experiences of those with sufficient resources rather than those of the entire target group. Thus, public policy analysts must take these limitations into account when evaluating the program’s results.

Another recurring subject was exclusion based on nationality, especially among non-EU or non-Western European youth. One Turkish respondent described needing to apply to over 50 projects before getting a response, only to find out that many projects explicitly excluded applicants from Turkey. With specifics from other countries as well, some youth pointed out the complexity of the application process, lack of guidance, and poor communication from the responsible organizers. Several mentioned that the information is hard to find, particularly in countries like France or Romania. One shared that “the ESC is completely unknown in France... the website is not well done.” Others noted that forms and logistics are difficult to manage without prior experience or support. These results highlight the existence of barriers that may discourage participants, particularly those who lack digital skills or technical support. Similarly, communication issues may indicate a lack of transparency and poor institutional communication, leading to the indirect exclusion of potential beneficiaries. This can be interpreted as a variation in the quality of implementation at national



level, suggesting that the effectiveness of such programs depends not only on their design but also on how they are managed at the local or national level.

While many responses were critical, some respondents categorized the programs as positive experiences because the programs are trying to be inclusive. They cited the financial aid being adjusted based on the host country, and shared stories of participants from underprivileged backgrounds who managed to join.

The last part of the study revealed suggested improvements. Therefore, we asked the participants what improvements would make the program more inclusive (more funding, better outreach, simpler application process, etc.) and why. Among the most common suggestions, we mention the following: a) Increase funding and financial aid: Most participants emphasized the need for increased financial support. Many mentioned that the current stipends barely cover basic needs, especially in high-cost countries, making it difficult for students from low-income backgrounds or economically weaker countries to take part in such an opportunity. More funding would make the program accessible to a broader demographic. It would also help reduce stress related to budgeting and money management during the experience. b) Easier application process: Many responses pointed out the complexity and inconsistency of the application process. Therefore, simplifying and standardizing the process, ensuring clear communication, and reducing paperwork would lower barriers to entry. c) Improved communication and visibility: Many participants said that the program is still not well-known or easily accessible to those who could benefit most. The recommendation would be to increase promotion in universities, rural areas, smaller towns, and through youth institutions. Better marketing and more accessible information would help reach a more diverse group of young people. On top of that, active input from the EU Institutions to promote these youth opportunities would bring even more light and desire to participate. d) Improved accommodation and housing support: While some praised the housing support, others reported major issues or knew peers who faced difficult living conditions. More checks on partner organizations to ensure decent accommodation were recommended. e) More inclusion for people with disabilities or health needs: Several responses stressed the importance of supporting participants with special needs and ensuring they are respected and understood throughout the experience. f) Improved information platforms: Calls were made for better-designed websites, centralized application platforms, and more transparent details about organizations and project roles. This could also be seen as part of the call for better communication and visibility.

However, there were also responses indicating no need for improvements or any possible suggestions. Approximately five respondents stated that they were satisfied with the program they took part in and had no suggestions for improvement. Moreover, there were also around two or three participants who gave neutral or unsure responses that didn't suggest improvements but didn't strongly indicate satisfaction either.

Having identified areas of difficulty, participants were also asked to share constructive suggestions for enhancing the program, by giving answers for the third question, namely 'What suggestions do you have for improving the program?'. Their recommendations reveal a strong commitment to the values of inclusivity, efficiency, and meaningful engagement and offer a roadmap for the continuous evolution of Erasmus+ and ESC experiences.

A recurring suggestion was the simplification and digitalization of administrative processes. Respondents frequently proposed an easier, transparent, and accessible application process, with several calls for the reduction of paperwork and the balance of required documents across institutions. For many, digital tools could play a role in eliminating repetitive tasks and improving communication between students, universities, and host organizations. One participant summed it up well: "Simplify the process overall and make it more



transparent/realistic in terms of expectations.” Another major area for improvement was funding and financial support. Many participants emphasized the need for increased stipends, faster reimbursements, and greater financial accessibility, particularly for students and volunteers. Suggestions such as raising volunteer allowances and even creating dedicated university-managed housing platforms and Erasmus-friendly rental contracts to help students navigate accommodation challenges. Several respondents proposed that hosting organizations and institutions should be more closely monitored, with periodic check-ups to ensure participants receive equitable treatment and a fulfilling experience. This was particularly relevant when considering stories shared about emotional strain or inadequate support at volunteer placements.

A call for greater inclusivity and outreach was also constant. Participants urged the program to better target underrepresented groups, such as youth from rural areas, working-class families, and disabled communities. Proposals included partnerships with local schools and NGOs, more accessible promotional efforts, and ensuring that projects themselves are inclusive in design and practice. Participants requested better-defined roles, marketable skill development, and stronger coordination within workplaces, especially considering employment as an issue that youth is facing. Coordinators were encouraged to be more active and involved, not only administratively but also socially, by organizing community events and providing emotional support. Improving inter-institutional coordination was another suggestion, particularly regarding course recognition, credit transfers, and deadlines in academic related opportunities. More cooperation between partner universities and better alignment of academic calendars and curricula were seen as essential for better exchanges and less stress on students during their exchange time abroad.

Finally, respondents encouraged better marketing and visibility for the program. Despite its strong reputation in larger academic centers, some felt that Erasmus+, and even more so ESC, remain underpromoted in smaller or less accessible regions. Suggestions included online visibility, social media campaigns, and information sessions led by former participants to raise awareness and encourage broader participation.

## DISCUSSION

While looking into the correlation between the theoretical part of youth policies in the EU and the empirical results of our study, we can first identify two areas open to discussion: a) Policy and practice – the legal framework of youth policies, with the EU having supporting competences in this field, meaning that the EUYS offers a framework but not a binding and specific enforcement. Due to this legal status, it is not surprising that a majority of respondents pointed out inconsistent support, lack of funding, and poor organizational structure in Erasmus+ and ESC projects, showing exactly how institutional goals may not fully translate into real-life experiences; b) The 11 Youth Goals - the EUYS builds on the Youth Goals developed through structured dialogue with young people. Among these goals we can point out Equality of All Genders, Inclusive Societies, Mental Health & Wellbeing, and Quality Employment for All, which are aligned with what respondents mostly identified as the most pressing issues. Therefore, the relevance of these Youth Goals is confirmed by the target group, however, many also said the programs do not do enough in practice to address them.

Respondents’ answers highlight that motivation to participate in these programs is primarily related to professional development and cultural experience, while the main barriers encountered are administrative and financial. Among respondents’ recommendations were included more transparency in the application process, flexible methods of participation, and simpler procedures. Thus, while the EUYS sets ambitious and relevant goals, particularly in the areas of inclusion, digital engagement, and youth empowerment, its implementation often



remains uneven and subject to national or institutional limitations. The experiences and personal accounts of Erasmus+ and ESC participants highlight a need for more consistent support structures, greater financial accessibility, and better communication, as well as an even stronger alignment with the theoretical values of the EUYS. It can be stated that, on the one hand, there are structural issues that institutions must deal with, starting with making the process more straightforward to lower barriers for individuals with different backgrounds, ensuring that more people can access the program without dealing with complex bureaucratic procedures. On the other hand, increasing outreach to diverse communities to ensure broader participation, along with offering more financial support to help people from varied economic backgrounds to join such programs, would be beneficial for society. Otherwise, bureaucratic and financial barriers can lead to selective participation. These findings reinforce the importance of grounding EU youth policy in both statistical realities and the direct voices of young people. By doing so, reassurance that future strategies are not only well-designed but also meaningfully applied across Europe are then given.

Trends such as the decline in life satisfaction, the growing importance of digital competencies, and ongoing economic and demographic disparities across the EU directly reflect many of the concerns raised by respondents, particularly regarding mental health, financial accessibility, and uneven support structures. These statistics reinforce the relevance of the EUYS and its priority areas while also highlighting the urgency of translating policy into practice in a way that responds to the realities of young people today.

There have been certain steps taken by European institutions to acknowledge the challenges faced by young people, together with proposals on how to combat these problems and give young people a supporting hand in personal and professional development as important citizens of the European community. However, there are a few sensitive areas for youth which should be better taken into consideration while formulating youth policies, due to the recurrence of those topics and the numbers that are still alarming and should be solved – this is especially in the areas of education and employment which in turn are linked to social and economic possibilities and backgrounds that lead to a deeper investigation into the inequality of youth opportunities across Member States. Lastly, the existing and notable investments in youth that are the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ are important means of helping European youth community in educational, professional and personal development, which is the reason why these actions should be provided with more visibility. There is still a significant percentage of young people, mostly from difficult backgrounds, that have not even heard of these opportunities and therefore, the European Union should take such aspects into account and develop specific means for all the young people to hear and participate, if interested, in projects from one of the two mentioned actions.

Bridging the gap between theory, data, policy objectives, and individual experience remains a critical challenge for the future of young people in the EU, and the future policy developments related to them.

## CONCLUSION

The ESC initiative aims to solidify solidarity alongside other core European values and principles in youth by offering them the opportunity to develop and transition effectively on the labor market as part of their transformation into responsible adults that will uphold and strengthen the future. At the same time, the Erasmus+ programme offers mobilities and cooperation opportunities in fields such as higher education, vocational education and training, school education, adult education, youth and sport. However, as it was stated in this paper, despite all the documents and papers issued by the EU that stress upon the problems faced by the young generation and the solutions that are offered, there is still a very small percent of



youth that is actually taking those opportunities because there is a lack of visibility and willingness to properly introduce a bigger majority of young people to the instruments that they need. The institutional steps taken at EU level, regarding youth, do represent a stance that the EU is aware of its need to integrate and support the youth community. However, the young generation is often given solutions on paper that are not turned into concrete actions. Therefore, the link between existing institutional frameworks and the actual actions is missing, which leads to young people still facing challenges and believing that there is no one to listen and intervene.

Our paper offers insight into how a specific group of participants perceive and experience key elements of the EUYS, directly through their participation in Erasmus+ and ESC programs. The study revealed a generally positive attitude toward Erasmus+ and ESC, with most participants describing the experience as personally and professionally successful. Key benefits included cultural exchange, language improvement, digital skill development, and enhanced independence, which can be related to the EUYS objectives, as well as the 11 EU Youth Goals. However, many respondents also highlighted challenges such as limited financial support, bureaucratic obstacles, lack of adequate mentorship, and inconsistent access for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. Notably, issues like employment opportunities and inclusion emerged as the main concerns, highlighting the need for closer alignment between EU policy goals and the actual realities of young participants.

Moreover, there is a perceptible gap between the intentions behind the Strategy and the real experiences of young participants in mobility programs and projects. While the strategy aspires to foster equal opportunities and empower youth through mobility and civic engagement, participants often face practical obstacles that limit their ability to fully benefit from these opportunities. Financial barriers, bureaucratic complexity, poor communication from hosting organizations, and a lack of tailored support for disadvantaged groups illustrate the discontinuity between policy ideals and implementation. On the one hand, we believe that the problem lies in the mismatch between the goals and the available means of implementation – particularly in terms of financial resources – which affects how these programs are implemented at the local level; therefore, a reassessment of local capacities and needs would be necessary. On the other hand, the fact that financial barriers limit access to these programs is due to the way they were designed, so these programs need to be adjusted to reduce future vulnerabilities. Such barriers put vulnerable individuals at a disadvantage, which may lead to the spread of inequalities. From a public policy perspective, an interpretive angle concerns the impact on program participation and outcomes. This underscores the need for more consistent monitoring and evaluation and a stronger national-level coordination, to ensure that EU youth policies translate into meaningful, accessible experiences on the ground.

While this paper offers insights into the implementation and perception of the EUYS through its programs, it also has certain limitations. The primary shortcoming lies in the scope of the study, which is based on data from a limited sample of Erasmus+ and ESC participants. The use of snowball sampling may have resulted in a relatively homogenous sample, as participants were recruited through existing networks. The study is exploratory in nature, and the findings are not generalizable. As such, the findings cannot be considered representative of all young people across the EU, but the representation was not the aim of our study. The aim of the paper was to explore participants' perceptions and to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences, reactions, and feelings regarding the two youth-oriented mobility programs. Another limitation of the research could be related to the geographical focus, however, given that our study was qualitative, the responses were provided by those who wanted to participate in the research during the specific time period without considering the country of origin.



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