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EFTA WORKING GROUP ON EDUCATION TRAINING AND YOUTH

EEA EFTA COMMENT ON the Commissions GREEN PAPER
“Promoting the learning mobility of young people”

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The EEA EFTA States (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) welcome the Commission's initiative to promote the learning mobility of young people in Europe through this Green Paper. As full participants in the EU mobility programmes (the Lifelong Learning Programme, Youth in Action and others), the EEA EFTA States look forward to playing an active part in the follow-up to the Green Paper. The EEA EFTA States are orienting their comments according to the three general themes of the Green Paper: *preparing for learning mobility, the stay abroad and follow-up and a new partnership for mobility*.

General Comments

The EEA EFTA States recognise the importance of an open dialogue at European level to share experiences, to identify best practices and to agree on actions to tackle common challenges for European mobility.

The *open method of coordination* constitutes in our view an important instrument for establishing this dialogue between the EU, its Member States and the Associated Countries and for seeking European best practices.

The EEA EFTA States also welcome the possibility to take part in the debate on how to advance and improve learning mobility for young people. The EEA EFTA States are actively involved in developing the mobility of young people through their participation in the EU mobility programmes and their membership in relevant European and international education and mobility organisations. We therefore take the opportunity of this position paper to recall our priorities on mobility in Europe and to make suggestions on the directions to be taken.

1. PREPARING FOR A PERIOD OF LEARNING MOBILITY

Information and guidance play a central role in decision making concerning learning mobility. Since a decision to move to another country for learning purposes involves many aspects, ranging from the educational content of the programme to practical arrangements, it is necessary to collect relevant information and make it accessible in well-known channels. In the *Bologna Process* it is recognised that the availability of information and guidance related to mobility is not sufficient. The amount of information needs to be increased and at the same time the information needs to become more available and accessible. In the past few years, a considerable amount of information on mobility has been collected and instruments and tools have been produced. The European Commission has set up various information portals which highlight different aspects of learning mobility, such as *PLOTEUS*, *YOUTH*, *Study in Europe*, *Euroguidance*, and *EURODESK*, etc. Although the existing information sources and tools are helpful, it is evident that some steps could be taken in order to improve their accessibility, functionality and standards.

It might also be useful to develop standard information tools and instruments. The *Youth in Action* programme, for example, offers *EURODESK* services, which is a contact and information point providing relevant information and guidance concerning possibilities for individual mobility. A common European database is used for the search on information, sorted by target destinations (countries), project types, activity fields, duration for voluntary services, etc. The database undergoes periodical quality checks, and therefore is a reliable source of information and a good tool of administration. The *Leonardo da Vinci* programme, on the other hand, does not have such a European reference list. Contacts between organisations are usually established during contact seminars, preparatory visits, etc.

It is reasonable to suggest that age negatively influences the urge to move abroad. Family and work life obligations, as well as other factors, such as home purchasing, determine the choice. Some of our statistics show that these factors are not barriers in the same way for people under the age of 27 years.

A more demanding challenge is to change the attitude of university, college and school managers and their staff when it comes to mobility. At universities and colleges there sometimes exists a notion that it is important to keep one's students and not to lose them to other universities or colleges. In schools a growing dissatisfaction might evolve when teachers use some of their time in planning for work connected to internationalisation, exchange and cooperation with schools abroad, instead of using their time for "what they are supposed to do".

Role models should be used to share their experience with other people interested in spending parts of their study or profession in other countries. In addition to motivating these people to take part in mobility, role models will also be useful in providing practical information on how each person can overcome potential linguistic or cultural obstacles. This could be information regarding courses, websites, television programmes etc. –

anything that might prepare the person for their stay in another country. Most of all, such role models might also be constructive in breaking down some of the myths that could play a role in preventing people from taking part in mobility. Much of this work is already done by for example the International Student Union.

Educational institutions should continue to establish institutional mechanisms that facilitate mobility both from and to the institution. This can be done whenever the institutions engage in cooperation agreements with foreign institutions. Such facilitation might provide opportunities to follow courses in English or other major languages at the different universities or colleges. Additional facilitating work might be language competence building, as well as the promotion of intercultural dialogue.

There are also some obstacles to mobility in the national educational structures and in the employment sector, especially when it comes to the recognition of qualifications. It is thus important to identify and explain the circumstances under which the mobility periods, and the competences acquired during these periods in other countries, are recognised by the national authority bodies prior to departure. VET systems and programmes differ considerably among European countries. The question of the compatibility of national curricula among different countries, and the recognition of international mobility, is often raised. In order to see if two programmes are congruent, a precise description of the learning outcomes should be provided, for example in the learning contract, which is prepared, before the departure, by the sending organisation, the hosting organisation and the trainee. Another means of diminishing these difficulties could be modularisation, i.e. the division of programmes in to smaller units with clear descriptions of learning aims, and opening up the possibilities to take these units in other countries.

Further financial support might come from participation in the *Lifelong Learning Programme*, but its grants seldom cover all the expenses.

In general the procedure to obtain a visa and other necessary documents should be easier and managed more quickly.

Mobility of students is important and must be based on quality when it comes to choice of institution and study programmes. In order to ensure a mobility period of high quality it will be important to aspire to channel most of the exchange through institutional agreements between different educational institutions. In this respect it will be essential to request that the institutions establish cooperation agreements with partners of high quality, and subsequently to encourage students and staff to choose these partner institutions. The number of participants in quality student exchange programmes and degree seeking students at foreign universities must increase, which will require a high standard of information and guidance regarding high quality study abroad opportunities.

Another key aspect in quality assurance is the establishment of networks and partnerships. Through such networks and partnerships, participating organisations become acquainted with the different systems of education and learning contexts in other

countries. They develop mutual trust and reliance on each other. In order to design mobility schemes of high quality, sending and hosting organisations should spend some time together in order to discover the differences and similarities in their national education systems, and discuss the compatibility of their educational programmes, local company networks for apprentices, practical arrangements, plans for future development, etc. The establishment of such networks is an important prerequisite for successful learning mobility.

2. THE STAY ABROAD AND FOLLOW-UP

Educational institutions should continue to establish institutional mechanisms that facilitate mobility both from and to the institution. This can be done whenever the institutions engage in cooperation agreements with foreign institutions. Such facilitation might provide opportunities to follow courses in English or other major languages at the different universities or colleges. Additional facilitating work might be language competence building, as well as promotion of intercultural dialogue.

Role models should be used in order to share their experience with other people interested in spending parts of their study or profession in other countries. In addition to motivating these people to take part in mobility, role models will also be useful in order to provide practical information on how each person can overcome potential linguistic or cultural obstacles.

There are areas where validation and recognition still face challenges. Competence from certain areas within vocational education and training, as well as from prior learning and work experience, are for instance not approved in all countries. One of the key success factors of learning mobility is the recognition of learning outcomes acquired during a mobility period spent abroad. In order to enable the validation and recognition of learning outcomes, it is necessary to have suitable and commonly used tools, instruments and processes. European instruments, which are available at present, include:

- the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)
- the European Credit System for Vocational Training (ECVET)
- the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)
- the YOUTHPASS for youth exchanges and volunteering
- the EUROPASS for the transparency of qualifications and competencies, etc.

The proper implementation and application of these tools and instruments is a domain of the national authorities in the different European countries.

3. A NEW PARTNERSHIP FOR MOBILITY

Cross-sector teams of players, coming from political, business, education, innovation and other fields, should be engaged in the promotion of international learning mobility.

Through the EEA Agreement, the EEA EFTA States participate fully in many of the EU programmes, and the education area in general is EEA relevant.

Through the EEA Financial Mechanism and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism, the three EEA EFTA States, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway, contribute to the reduction of social and economic disparities in Europe, and support new EU Member States in their efforts to participate fully in the enlarged Internal Market. The establishment of the financial mechanisms was agreed with the EU in the lead-up to the 2004 and 2007 enlargements of the EU, which entailed an enlargement of the EEA by 12 countries. Through these mechanisms, a wide range of public authorities, institutions, organisations and businesses in the beneficiary states are eligible for grant support to realise projects. These mechanisms will make more than €300 million available annually to support projects and funds in a wide range of priority sectors linked to mobility and EU programmes, such as research, cultural heritage, sustainable development, health and childcare. See <http://www.eeagrants.org/>. The funding also includes specific mobility funds in the fields of education and research.

It is important to include and develop international mobility in professional programmes, as part of the work done in higher education both in the Bologna process and in the European framework for education and training. It is important that a mentality that embraces lifelong learning is consolidated within the business sector. Efforts should be made in order to allow employees to participate in mobility projects as part of their professional development, and mobility engagement should be rewarded. This is important both for professional work and for career development, but also in order for employees to experience both the challenges and the benefits that a mobility period can generate. Both aspects are important in order to motivate and inspire others.

Teachers and trainers represent a key factor in motivating and stimulating young people to participate in mobility, and there is a necessity to encourage a mobility period and recognise it as an integral part of teachers and trainers' career development. Furthermore we agree with the concern raised in the Green Paper with the fact that too often mobility is the result of the work laid down by individual teachers and trainers that feel personally committed to the importance of internationalisation in education, rather than the result of a systematic, recognised and integrated part of their daily work in schools and training institutions.

It is important that mobility is strengthened in initial teacher education, when mobility is a real option for students. This is a phase in life when students in general have less family or work obligations than when they finish their studies and when it is easier for them to contemplate a mobility stay abroad. Mobility and internationalisation should also be regarded as an asset in teacher education.

In addition to mobility as part of the initial teacher education, work should be done in order to allow teachers to participate in mobility projects as part of their own professional development, and not only as facilitators and project managers for young people. They would need to receive assistance in practical arrangements, as well as being offered flexible work arrangements. This is important both for the professional work as a teacher and for career development, but also in order for them to experience both the challenges and the benefits that a mobility period can generate. Both aspects are important in order to motivate and inspire others, but they are also crucial in order to be able to make good preparations and plans for positive and qualitatively good mobility experiences for young people. Furthermore the incorporation of internationalisation in the schools' overall strategy is needed.

A more demanding challenge is to change some of the attitudes at university, college and school management level and amongst their staff when it comes to mobility. In schools a growing dissatisfaction might evolve when teachers use some of their time in planning for work connected to internationalisation, exchange and cooperation with schools abroad, instead of using their time for "what they are supposed to do".

Benchmarking and the open method of coordination are other strategies to intensify international learning mobility.
