

European issues

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In support of European Apprenticeships

“Only the interest of the trainees counts”

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The European Union’s flagship programme, [Erasmus+](#) is about to celebrate its thirty-fifth anniversary. It is both a formidable instrument for mobility, helping young people to discover other practices and other cultures and to speak a foreign language, as well as a formidable lever for broadening professional horizons and opening up to European citizenship. In recognition of its success, the Council and the Parliament have just increased its budget by 80% for the coming years. This financial effort will ensure that its benefits are finally spread to all young people, beyond the ranks of higher education. The "generations of Erasmus students" still include few apprentices who have experienced genuine immersion, long enough to produce all its beneficial effects.

Mobility is a factor of inclusion offered to all young people, in particular to those who have struggled to find their place in general education. Vocational training is a healthy alternative because it gives confidence and self-esteem. Through apprenticeship, all young people, regardless of their educational background and abilities, are able to reveal their personal talent, which is often ignored and sometimes thwarted by the academic framework. The combination of learning and mobility, which is still unusual, is certainly a path to excellence. Its deployment is overdue, in the interests of young people, employers and the economy of the EU Member States.

Via an encouraging political gesture during the [Porto Summit](#) on 7 and 8 May last, the heads of State and Government adopted a promising resolution: “We will prioritise measures to support young people, who have been hit hard by the Covid-19 crisis, which has profoundly disrupted their participation in the

labour market as well as their education and training plans. Young people are an indispensable source of dynamism, talent and creativity for Europe. We must ensure that they become the vehicle for an inclusive green and digital recovery to help build the Europe of tomorrow, including by making full use of the opportunities offered by Erasmus+ to promote mobility across Europe for all students and trainees.”

Having long observed the somewhat elitist deviation of *Erasmus+*, I felt it was imperative to work towards its democratisation by opening it up to apprentices. When I was elected Member of the European Parliament in 2014, I immediately sought to understand this unbalanced and unfair situation. When I became chairman of the Budgets Committee, I pushed the vote on a pilot project, “*Long term mobility for apprentices*” to launch an experiment to identify and assess the obstacles and impediments that were keeping apprentices away. It was provided with 4.5 million euro to cover specific expenses incurred by voluntary Apprentice Training Centres (CFA), which were prepared to encourage some of their citizens to [continue their training beyond the national borders](#). A set of specifications defined the conditions of eligibility, in particular the minimum duration of the period of mobility set at three months. The European Commission called for expressions of interest from the training centres. Around thirty, half of which were located in France, were selected. However, in three years, barely more than two hundred young people have undertaken long-term mobility. A meagre result. This shows how overwhelming the inertia is. And yet, in the meantime, the Commission has taken some positive initiatives. In 2018 it adopted a “[Recommendation](#)” addressed to the Council for “[A](#)

Quality and Effective Apprenticeship". In addition, it has earmarked €400 million over three years for work-associated training under the *ErasmusPro* programme. As they were unable to leave to abroad during their training, several thousand young people did so after obtaining their diploma. They have benefited from this aid. This shows that mobility during training is meeting with strong resistance. The truth is that the obstacles have been very quickly apprehended.

The initial observations and lessons learned were invaluable in carrying out the mission entrusted to me by Muriel Pénicaud, the French Minister of Labour at the time, following the election of Emmanuel Macron as President of the Republic. This mission was an extension of the pilot project, since its purpose was to "*strengthen the European mobility of apprentices*". I submitted my report in January 2018. As a preamble to the proposals for action that I formulated with a view to achieving the objective assigned by the Minister, I described the obstacles to be removed. For the most part, three years later, they have lost none of their dissuasive impact:

- **The legal barrier.** Apprenticeship is an employment contract whose purpose is training, which involves the employer signing an agreement with a training centre. National legislations are diverse and complicate the choice of the status reserved for the young person in the host country during his/her mobility. Until 2018, the French apprenticeship master was obliged to pay the young person during the period of mobility. While this constraint was accepted for apprentices in higher education, it blocked the departure of young people in level 3 and 4 EQF. This restriction was lifted by legislative amendment. Unfortunately, this amendment no longer allows employers who wish to maintain remuneration to do so, which complicates practices established in this respect. The law is about to be amended to make this obligation optional. The agreement has been formalised, but a legislative vehicle still needs to be found in the parliamentary agenda;
- **The financial barrier.** The Erasmus+ grant only partially covers travel and accommodation costs. However, it is vital to ensure the young person's financial independence and social protection during their mobility. In some countries, there is no apprentice status. In these cases, alternative formulas should be sought to provide security for the young person during their mobility. In agreement with the national authorities, the European Social Fund (ESF+) can be called upon to contribute; at this stage it is a question of political will;
- **The academic barrier.** The award of the vocational qualification is a Member State prerogative. The recognition of learning outcomes often comes up against national rules and procedures. The creation in 2009 of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training ([ECVET](#)) set the framework for improving the recognition, capitalisation and transfer of knowledge and experience gained through mobility. Some countries have integrated this framework into their certification practices, with pragmatism and the delegation of responsibility to the actors on the ground, trainers and companies. Others are struggling to move forward in this direction due to principles and traditions that are slow to integrate international openness into vocational training curricula.
- **The linguistic barrier.** If the young person does not speak the language of the host country, he or she should master some key words in the local vocabulary. In fact, in most countries, English is the most widely spoken language. But mobility requires reciprocity. The host country must also be concerned about the language skills of the young people it has attracted to its training centres. It is therefore important to provide teaching in a foreign language that can be understood by the greatest number of people. In the experimentation linked to the pilot project, several young people from Eastern European countries who wanted to come to France, for example, gave up their project when they realised that there were no lessons in

English. Paradoxically, we can imagine that the spread of the French speaking world might for the use of the English language!

- **The psychological barrier.** Perceived as a first long separation, mobility raises fears. Among young people, who are reluctant to leave their comfort zone, as well as for parents who are slow to empower their children. Fears on the part of companies who are afraid of losing their apprentice, suddenly attracted by another destiny. The same phenomenon can be felt by political leaders who fear the migration of some of their young people to other countries in search of human resources.

Currently, the health constraint has been added to these five brakes. Although we must remain prudent, everything suggests that the end of the crisis is in sight. It is therefore urgent to prepare for recovery. To this end, let us make good use of the instruments that Europe places at our disposal to help young people build their professional careers. The barriers identified bear witness to history, to laws and rules enacted at a given time, to administrative complexity, to conservatism, and sometimes even to corporatism. In the field of training, the reforms to be carried out have as their only justification the interest of the trainees. Consequently, all the stakeholders are called upon to combine their efforts to trigger the process and offer the greatest number of them access to the added value conferred by international openness. For Europe and the Member States, vocational training is an investment in the future, a driver of growth and wealth creation. The strategy to be undertaken relies on two key players: the training centres and the companies. The effectiveness of their commitment depends on the determination and support of the public authorities.

PUBLIC AUTHORITIES SERVING THE INTERESTS OF TRAINEES

Governments are setting priorities and deciding on the necessary reforms and public resources required. A new era is opening up and shows a resolute ambition for apprenticeship and its corollary of international openness. Without waiting for the institution of a

harmonised European apprentice status, it is now possible to take on a young foreigner as an apprentice for six months in a company and in a training centre. The situation remains complicated for a period of training that is less than this. Legal obstacles have been removed for the most part. On a positive note, apprentices on a mobility scheme have access to student social security cover if the host country does not offer guarantees of this kind.

There is still a crucial and delicate issue to be dealt with. The recognition of mobility achievements must become systematic. Recurrent uncertainties inhibit projects. It is inconceivable that they could be used any longer as a pretext for renouncing mobility. The academic considerations invoked must not deprive the trainee of the recognition of his or her abilities. In this regard the [ECTS model](#) (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) provides an example of the appropriate procedure. It is explicitly suggested in the [Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 in terms of education and vocational training \(EFP\)](#) for sustainable competitiveness, social equity and resilience. The call for mobility would be futile in the absence of operational guarantees. It is indeed important that the time and content of training undertaken in mobility, on the basis of a methodical evaluation, be taken into account when awarding diplomas. This is a fundamental point.

In synergy with State services, the regions and local authorities have a role to play in inclusion and vocational training policies. As part of their actions, they are devoting resources to the future of young people. Their experience and their role as managers of European funds place them in the front line. The EU budgetary framework for the seven years 2021-2027 (€1074 billion) includes two credit lines likely to be opened up for vocational training: the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), with more than €200 billion, and the European Social Fund (ESF+), with €88 billion. In coordination with the States, the regions can define the operational programmes and arbitrate the allocation of resources. In short, the lights are on to give new impetus to vocational training.

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TRAINING CENTRES OPEN TO THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET TO BROADEN THE PROFESSIONAL HORIZONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

The international opening of a training centre cannot be improvised. For each establishment, it is the result of a coherent and forward-looking educational project, supported by all members of the educational community. Implementation requires the appointment of a "mobility adviser" within the teaching team. His/her task is to make young people and their apprenticeship masters aware of the benefits of long-term mobility. It is this person who contacts foreign training centres with a view to establishing partnerships, defining by means of an agreement the values, objectives, methods and procedures for assessing the achievements of mobility. In parallel with the preparation of departures abroad, he/she must also organise the reception of young people from other countries, in particular their integration into the company and their accommodation. The mobility adviser coordinates language courses and may direct students to the digital services promoted by the European Commission, in particular [OLS \(Online Linguistic Support\)](#).

During the initial phase, which lasts at least three years, specific resources are needed to finance the coordinator's post. In addition to skills managers, the EU budget could be called upon (Structural Funds: ERDF and ESF+; Recovery and Resilience Facility).

At regional level, the activation of the system can be facilitated by the appointment of a " long-term mobility developer for apprentices ". This person would be responsible for informing, encouraging projects, supporting, coordinating and advising volunteers, and would work closely with the Erasmus+ Agency. This mission could be financed, in agreement with the Member States, since this is a cohesion policy that is largely administered at national level, by the structural funds of the EU budget.

EMPLOYER PARTNERS INVESTED IN TRAINING SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE

In apprenticeship matters, companies are central to the training system. Through their professional branches,

they define strategies and direct funding. Under certain conditions, they are entitled to finance apprenticeships with the help of contributions paid by employers, to help the branches to develop professional qualifications and to assist companies, particularly SMEs, in defining their training needs.

It is within this framework that decisions are made in favour of the international opening of training courses. Recognised as a vector of excellence and fulfilment for young people, European mobility must also be in line with the development of company strategies. Their involvement is one of the essential levers for the development of mobility on a large scale. This dynamic presupposes the appointment by the company of a tutor in charge of monitoring apprentices during the various phases of their training, particularly during mobility; the tutor is also attentive to the induction conditions of young people coming from abroad. This system can give rise to an "apprentice exchange" systems, which ensures reciprocity.

In the near future, apprenticeships are likely to be developed in the public sphere. The State and local authorities, hospitals and medico-social establishments are already recruiting apprentices. The specific nature of these employers will have to be taken into account both in the definition of the courses and in their financing.

THE EUROPEAN UNION IN SUPPORT

The European Union has just adopted a programme and funding to develop "Centres of Vocational Excellence – CoVE's". They give concrete expression, on the scale of a territorial ecosystem, to osmosis between companies and training and research establishments. They also act on a transnational level, through [vocational excellence centre platforms](#) bringing together European players who share common interests (sectoral, societal). These centres of educational innovation will be attentive to the needs of the market on an international scale and may, at the same time, create a particularly favourable climate for internationalisation and, ultimately, for the mobility of apprentices. The role of the "mobility advisers" and "developers of long-term mobility for

apprentices" is to contribute to the creation of such centres of excellence.

Finally, the creation of a harmonised status for young people during their period of European mobility would facilitate the resolution of current legal and financial problems. Depending on the country, the apprenticeship contract takes different forms (employee, paid or unpaid trainee, with or without social protection). Harmonisation of the legal rules defining the mobile apprenticeship contract would remove the reticence expressed by families, young people and companies. It would facilitate the mission of training centres with their partners who are still hesitant to commit to mobility. However, these difficulties can be overcome when the parties concerned are determined to succeed. The current situation calls for the swift convergence and simplification of national legislation. The Commission is competent to submit a proposal for a recommendation to the Council along these lines. This would be in line with resolutions already adopted by the European Parliament to this end.

There is unanimous recognition of the success of the European Higher Education area, to which all the students who have benefited from the Erasmus programme can testify with a touch of pride. The time has come to generalise mobility for apprentices and all vocational trainees. The anachronistic nature of the obstacles identified calls for courage, determination and action. They will not withstand the dual pressure of those involved on the ground, training centres and employers, and of political leaders. The only interest to be taken into consideration is that of the trainees. France will hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union during the first half of 2022. I am convinced that it will use its authority to ensure that Europe meets the expectations of its young people, that it creates the conditions that will empower them to take control of their professional destiny with confidence.

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