

Fostering Inclusion and Integration in Student Mobility

Policy Recommendations



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Introduction

The ECEM project aims to enhance students' participation in civic engagement initiatives within the Erasmus+ programme. A workshop held in Brussels in April 2024 for Erasmus+ National Agency (NA) representatives built on insights from an earlier online session, focusing on advancing the horizontal priority of "Participation in democratic life, common values, and civic engagement" within the next Erasmus+ programme generation. Discussions explored opportunities, challenges, and policy recommendations across seven thematic areas, forming the basis of this document. The ideas outlined in the following pages reflect a continuous, collaborative process of gathering insights and experiences from students, community organisations, and higher education institutions throughout the project.

These recommendations are aimed at improving the civic engagement component in the Erasmus+ Programme 2028 – 2034 by strengthening these activities across all programme levels in higher education and beyond. Civic engagement should become a central theme of the Programme, including strengthening democratic participation, community engagement, community engaged learning, and societal outreach.

The **“Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Erasmus+ Programme for the period 2028-2034”** provides a policy framework where *“in line with the EU Preparedness Union Strategy, preparedness, resilience, participation in democratic life and civic engagement should be fostered through a bottom-up approach, encouraging organisations and institutions to play a key role in fostering digital and media literacy, critical thinking, promoting civic engagement, and learning about democracy and citizenship.”* Moreover, as stated in the Proposal, merging European Solidarity Corps into the 2028 – 2034 Erasmus+ Programme, opens new possibilities for strengthening the civic engagement within the Programme: *“Common areas of action and objectives between the 2021-2027 European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus+ programmes highlight the potential for enhanced synergy and regulatory coherence. Bringing all learning mobility, volunteering, cooperation and active citizenship opportunities together provides a*

single-entry point to all opportunities offered by the Union for young people and organisations active in the field of youth, allowing for a more coordinated and effective approach, and easier access for potential participants and beneficiaries. In this context, it is necessary to establish Erasmus+ 2028-2034, the Union Programme for education and training and also in the fields of youth and sport as the successor to the 2021-2027 Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes, which encompasses actions in the field of education and training, youth and sport and sets up the European Voluntary Humanitarian Aid Corps.”

With this context, and building on the findings and conclusions of the policy report “**Integration of Service-Learning Actions in Erasmus+ Mobilities**”¹, the recommendations set out in this document aim to provide further ideas and examples of improving both student mobilities, but also projects related to these topics.

¹ Jouve, S., Kalinova-Schmieder, N., (2025). Integration of Service-Learning Actions in Erasmus+ Mobilities, Policy Report

Policy recommendations

Erasmus+ Programme level

The Erasmus+ horizontal priority *Participation in democratic life, common values, and civic engagement* plays a crucial role in shaping the societal dimension of the Erasmus+ Programme, yet its broad and often ambiguous scope continues to create challenges for effective implementation. Without a shared understanding of what the priority entails, higher education institutions, National Agencies, and other beneficiaries face difficulties translating its principles into tangible actions. The overlapping nature of related concepts, such as participation, citizenship, and community engagement, further complicates operationalisation at both institutional and programme levels. To ensure the priority fulfils its transformative potential, a coherent and well-defined framework is needed, supported by precise terminology, structured guidance, and practical tools. Such clarity would enable stakeholders to align their strategies, measure progress, and foster meaningful civic participation across education systems, reinforcing the European commitment to democratic values and social cohesion.

1. Develop a shared implementation framework

A shared implementation framework should be established to clarify and connect key concepts such as ***common values, active citizenship, civic participation, and democratic engagement*** within the Erasmus+ Programme. This framework should provide precise definitions and outline their interrelations, helping both National Agencies and beneficiaries translate the broad horizontal priority into operational terms. It should be developed collaboratively by the European Commission, National Agencies, higher education institutions, student organisations, and civil society actors to ensure sectoral relevance and practical usability. While Inclusion and Diversity focus on equitable access and participation of underrepresented groups, the civic engagement priority uniquely emphasises active participation in democratic and community life. This distinction needs to be consistently communicated through all programme materials, calls, and guidance documents. The framework should map the different activity types associated with each

priority, highlighting where synergies can be created, such as inclusion-focused initiatives that incorporate local engagement, or civic engagement projects that promote access for disadvantaged groups, while respecting the specific objectives of each. This differentiation will not only enhance conceptual clarity but also strengthen the overall coherence and strategic alignment of Erasmus+ horizontal priorities. The framework should build on the example of the Inclusion&Diversity and Environment and fight against climate change priorities and their implementation guidelines. Finally, including “Civic engagement” priority into the ECHE monitoring framework should be explored.

2. Break down the priority into actionable themes

The broad scope of the civic engagement priority should be unpacked into **a series of actionable themes that provide greater operational clarity** for National Agencies and higher education institutions. These themes could include democratic participation and civic literacy, volunteering and community service, intercultural dialogue, sustainability and social responsibility, and digital or media literacy. Each theme should be accompanied by practical examples, suggested activity types, and potential indicators for assessing outcomes. This approach would help align local and institutional initiatives with the overarching goals of Erasmus+, while making it easier for project implementers to identify suitable formats, partnerships, and evaluation tools. The thematic approach should build directly on insights gathered during the ECCE pilot actions², which have demonstrated the value of structured thematic focus in achieving measurable results.

3. Sustain and consolidate accessible resources

To ensure the long-term effectiveness of the civic engagement priority, **the European Commission should provide tailored training and guidance to National Agencies** to help them support higher education institutions more effectively in this area. The SALTO Participation & Information Centre should serve as the main

² Kalinova-Schmieder, N., Uritu, M. O., Moura Abrantes Lopes Nunes, T., & Priori, A. (2025). Impactful Volunteering on Exchange. Erasmus Student Network AISBL. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16684830>

hub for expertise sharing and the organisation of such trainings, drawing on its established experience in participation and democratic engagement. Beyond training, the platform should continue to function as a centralised knowledge resource, integrating outputs from initiatives like the **ECEM Best Practice Compendium** and the **Toolkit**³, and showcasing good practices from across Europe. This approach would prevent the duplication of platforms and ensure that all relevant materials remain easily accessible to programme actors. To strengthen its impact, the platform should also feature interactive elements such as searchable databases, peer-learning modules, and multilingual content, supporting continuous professional development and cross-country collaboration among higher education and civil society stakeholders. Finally, exploring how to update the ECHE by including a section on this priority could be beneficial in increasing the awareness among HEIs.

National Level support for Higher Education Institutions

HEIs face resource constraints, lack of awareness, and difficulty measuring the impact of civic engagement initiatives. Enhanced support is critical to enable HEIs to align with the priority. As identified in the ECEM Report “**Connecting Community Engagement and Internationalisation: An Overview of Challenges and Opportunities**”, higher education institutions face several interconnected challenges in integrating Service-Learning into their structures and practices. Many institutions struggle with a lack of initiative and strategic vision to embed community engagement within their academic missions, often constrained by bureaucratic barriers, rigid procedures, and limited institutional frameworks to support innovation. The absence of clear guidance for academic staff on how to incorporate Service-Learning into curricula further limits its uptake, leaving professors without practical models or incentives to engage. Additionally, outdated pedagogical approaches and a lack of openness to experiential and community-based learning hinder the transition toward more flexible, participatory, and socially responsive education models that align with the

³ Kotkiewicz, G., Lepore, S., Kalinova-Schmieder, N. (2024). Volunteer on Exchange Actions Toolkit, Erasmus Student Network AISBL, www.ecem-project.org

principles of Service-Learning. Based on these findings, we are proposing the following steps that can be taken at national levels to support higher education institutions.

1. Strengthen national coordination and communication on the civic engagement priority

To ensure consistent and effective implementation of the civic engagement priority across Europe, countries should be encouraged to **develop dedicated national strategies or action plans** that set clear objectives and operational guidelines aligned with the Erasmus+ framework. These strategies should build on cross-sectoral collaboration, drawing inspiration from the youth and non-formal education sectors, where participatory and community-based approaches are already well established. Regular dialogue between National Agencies and higher education institutions should be institutionalised, with dedicated time in coordination meetings to address horizontal priorities beyond mobility management. In parallel, **targeted communication campaigns** should be developed to increase visibility and understanding of civic engagement activities. These campaigns, using relevant social media, webinars, newsletters, and storytelling approaches, should be tailored to the target audiences, highlighting student experiences, peer-to-peer engagement, and alumni stories that showcase the transformative impact of civic participation through Erasmus+.

2. Allocate resources for workshops and staff weeks focused on the priority

Dedicated financial and organisational resources should be allocated **to support workshops and staff weeks that directly address the civic engagement priority** rather than focusing solely on administrative aspects of mobility management. These thematic staff weeks would allow higher education institutions to exchange practices, co-create new initiatives, and deepen their understanding of how civic participation can be embedded into internationalisation strategies. Incentivising HEIs to design such activities underlines the importance of peer learning and

helps create a network of institutional champions for community-engaged internationalisation. National Agencies could support these initiatives through targeted funding calls, Transnational Cooperation Activities (TCAs), or collaborative formats under the Erasmus+ framework. Finally, Operational Support (OS) funds can be used for organising volunteering and integration activities for incoming students.

3. Facilitate partnerships between HEIs and NGOs through multilingual and collaborative formats

Building structured and sustained partnerships between higher education institutions, civil society organisations, and student associations is essential to advance the civic engagement dimension of Erasmus+. These partnerships should be encouraged through multilingual and inclusive approaches that allow broader participation of local and international actors. For example, this could include establishing **cross-sectoral working groups at the national level** to advance this priority involving civil society organisations. Events, working groups, and community dialogues could be organised using the **Living Lab methodology**, as successfully demonstrated in the ECEM activity in Berlin, which fostered co-creation between academia and community stakeholders. Such collaborative spaces should be further integrated into TCAs, Blended Intensive Programmes (BIPs), conferences, and training initiatives, bringing together HEIs, NGOs, and students to share expertise, build capacity, and design innovative engagement projects with tangible local and societal impact. ECEM **Handbook for Service-learning in Erasmus+**⁴ provides detailed guidance on using language and cultural exchange courses for integrating community service activities that promote intercultural understanding and collaboration. Service-Learning activities in this context may involve volunteering in language exchange programmes, cultural heritage preservation projects, or community-based initiatives that promote intercultural dialogue and appreciation. Next to this, virtual Service-Learning opportunities offer scalability, allowing institutions to

⁴ Skledar Matijević, A., & Fodor, A. (2024). Service-Learning: Enriching Communities Beyond Borders. Erasmus Student Network AISBL. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17341340>

accommodate a larger number of participants and scale up their Service-Learning initiatives without the limitations of physical space or resources.

This enables broader impact and reach within the institution and beyond. To make these concepts tangible, examples from the ECEM local phase, such as initiatives developed through the Living Lab in Berlin or other local engagement activities, should be used to illustrate how civic engagement manifests in practice and what outcomes can be achieved when students, institutions, and communities interact meaningfully. To have a better understanding of possible implementation frameworks, consult ECEM **Impactful Volunteering on Exchange report**⁵ which describes in detail how a participatory, values-driven framework designed to connect international mobility with local impact can contribute to this goal. The examples are based on specific activities shaped by their local context and sharing a common goal: to turn mobility into meaningful local impact through intercultural dialogue, inclusion, volunteering, youth participation, and civic engagement. Events took place in both urban and rural settings, ensuring a diverse geographic and social reach and often engaging audiences that are traditionally underrepresented in international exchanges. The publication contains detailed information on setting up coaching sessions, monitoring and support, implementation and impact monitoring.

4. Integrate civic engagement and cultural topics into language learning resources

The Online Language Support (OLS) platform and local language courses should be expanded to **include modules and materials that encourage cultural awareness and civic participation**. By embedding topics related to local culture, social values, and community engagement, these tools can help students better understand their host environments and participate more actively in civic life during their mobility. Local language courses could include thematic content about local history, traditions, and community challenges, complemented by opportunities for direct interaction with local stakeholders. This approach would

⁵ Kalinova-Schmieder, N., Uritu, M. O., Moura Abrantes Lopes Nunes, T., & Priori, A. (2025). Impactful Volunteering on Exchange. Erasmus Student Network AISBL. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16684830>

strengthen intercultural learning, promote inclusion, and turn language learning into a key instrument for fostering social integration and engagement within the Erasmus+ mobility experience.

Higher Education Institutions

HEIs play a central role in shaping the civic and community dimensions of international learning experiences. Both the ECEM Handbook and the ESNsurvey XV⁶ emphasise that HEIs should embed Service-Learning and community engagement in their internationalisation strategies, making civic participation a visible and valued part of mobility. Institutions are encouraged to integrate Service-Learning components within their curricula, ensuring academic recognition of students' participation through ECTS credits or diploma supplement entries. By doing so, HEIs move from viewing civic engagement as an extracurricular activity to treating it as an essential part of learning mobility that contributes to personal growth, intercultural competence, and employability.

1. Integrating Service-Learning into Institutional Strategies

Higher education institutions are encouraged to move beyond viewing civic engagement as an optional, extracurricular activity and to **embed Service-Learning within their institutional missions and internationalisation strategies**. Both the ECEM Handbook and ESNsurvey XV underline that civic participation should be recognised as an essential part of the student learning experience, contributing to academic, personal, and social development. This requires the strategic commitment of university leadership to allocate resources, create supportive policies, and integrate Service-Learning across disciplines. Embedding Service-Learning in curricula, supported by clear learning outcomes, reflective components, and assessment criteria, ensures that community engagement becomes part of formal education rather than a parallel activity. To ensure long-term sustainability, universities that integrate Service-Learning into their institutional strategies should also commit to **creating fair and supportive**

⁶ ESNsurvey XV (Dias et al., 2024)

working conditions for teaching staff. This includes formally recognising the time and effort invested in developing community partnerships and innovative teaching practices - through various forms of acknowledgment such as institutional recognition, visibility initiatives, or opportunities to link Service-Learning with research outputs - so that educators remain motivated and valued for their contribution to the university's societal mission.

2. Building Partnerships and Community Connections

Strong, sustained cooperation between HEIs and local stakeholders is key to the success of Service-Learning and civic engagement initiatives. The ECHEM Handbook⁷ highlights the importance of **multi-stakeholder collaboration involving academic staff, students, community-based organisations, and public authorities**. Similarly, the ESN findings stress that partnerships with local civil society organisations, NGOs, and municipalities can enhance international students' integration and contribute to internationalisation at home. By co-designing and implementing joint projects, HEIs and their partners can respond to real community needs while creating mutually beneficial learning experiences. Involving student organisations such as ESN in this process can further strengthen links between students and communities, ensuring that initiatives are inclusive, culturally sensitive, and sustainable. Such partnerships not only expand the impact of higher education but also position universities as active contributors to local development and social transformation.

3. Enhancing Student Engagement, Reflection, and Recognition

Students are at the core of Service-Learning and should be empowered as co-creators of meaningful community projects. The ESNsurvey XV findings indicate that community engagement is a strong pull factor for students when selecting their mobility destination. In line with this, the ECHEM Handbook calls on students to take an active role in planning, implementation, and reflection, turning engagement into a transformative learning process. However, setting up

⁷ Skledar Matijević, A., & Fodor, A. (2024). Service-Learning: Enriching Communities Beyond Borders. Erasmus Student Network AISBL. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17341340>

Service-Learning activity is time-intensive, and effectively involving exchange students from the outset requires careful consideration. For example, involving incoming students in a Service-Learning course during the first week of their mobility without prior preparation may not be effective, as they are still adapting to a new environment. Instead, it is recommended to present Service-Learning possibilities at an earlier stage, such as when selecting their mobility destination. Making Service-Learning courses visible in course catalogues is therefore essential, allowing students to take these opportunities into account when preparing their Learning Agreement. Involving student ambassadors in the promotion of Service-Learning can further enhance awareness, motivation, and peer-to-peer engagement. Additionally, higher education institutions should consider organising preparatory virtual meetings before the start of the mobility period to support cultural adjustment and familiarise students with expectations for community engagement.

The ESNsurvey XV findings show that students who participate in volunteering or civic activities during mobility report higher satisfaction and stronger feelings of belonging, both in their host communities and upon return home. To support this engagement, HEIs should provide **structured reflection opportunities and guidance to help students link their community experiences to academic content and transversal skills**. Formal recognition, through ECTS credits or diploma supplements, serves as both an incentive and a validation of the learning that occurs beyond the classroom, while linking it directly to Erasmus+ priorities on inclusion, participation, and democratic life. By valuing and systematising students' civic contributions, higher education institutions cultivate globally minded, socially responsible graduates who continue to participate actively in democratic and community life after their studies.

Finally, upon return, higher education institutions should guide students in sustaining their engagement within their home communities - both as part of the reintegration phase of mobility and as a continued commitment to strengthening the connection between academia and society.

4. Leveraging the Third Mission, Networks, and European University Alliances

To advance the integration of Service-Learning and civic engagement, **higher education institutions should capitalise on their third mission**, the societal outreach function that complements teaching and research, as a strategic framework for embedding community engagement in all institutional activities. By explicitly linking Service-Learning to their third mission statements, HEIs can position community-based education and civic responsibility as measurable dimensions of institutional impact. Participation in networks and European University Alliances offers an additional avenue to scale and sustain these efforts. Such collaborations enable institutions to share models of practice, co-develop transnational Service-Learning opportunities, and align community engagement with the broader objectives of the European Education Area. Through joint projects, alliances can foster cross-border partnerships with NGOs, municipalities, and social enterprises, thereby turning civic engagement into a truly European learning experience. In this way, HEIs not only strengthen their international visibility but also contribute to a common European vision of universities as agents of social innovation, inclusion, and democratic participation.

Way forward

Advancing civic engagement in higher education requires not only strategic frameworks, clear definitions, and sustainable funding, but also the effective use of practical tools and resources already developed through the ECEM project. To empower stakeholders within the Erasmus+ Programme, guidance and training must be underpinned by coherent frameworks such as those presented in the ECEM Handbook for Service-Learning, which provides theoretical foundations and implementation models linking mobility to community engagement. Complementing this, the ECEM Compendium of Good Practices showcases tested examples from across Europe, offering inspiration and replicable models for higher education institutions and civil society actors. For more operational support, the Toolkit for Volunteers on Exchange delivers step-by-step guidance for student organisations and local partners on how to design and manage volunteering and civic engagement activities, while the Publication on Inclusion and Engagement in Mobility through Volunteering demonstrates how civic participation can serve as a pathway to greater inclusion and accessibility in international mobility.

Together, these deliverables create an integrated ecosystem of knowledge, capacity-building, and practice that can guide institutions and National Agencies in implementing the Erasmus+ horizontal priority on participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement. Strengthening alignment between national strategies and European frameworks, supported by clear communication channels and robust evaluation mechanisms, will ensure that civic engagement becomes a visible and lasting feature of internationalisation, nurturing a generation of active, responsible citizens committed to democratic and inclusive societies.