



Contribution from Oppland County Authority to the European Commission's Green Paper on Promoting the Learning Mobility of Young People

Introduction

Oppland county authority welcomes the green paper on learning mobility. We have structured our response as answers to each question (see below). However, there are some comments that we would like to present before turning to the questions. Oppland county is located in Eastern Norway and has a population of 183 637. Oppland county authority is responsible for the upper secondary education and runs 14 upper secondary schools. The primary and lower secondary schools are run by the municipalities. In Oppland there are two institutions of higher education. They are state owned university colleges which offer bachelor, master and PhD programmes.

Internationalisation has become an important part of our education, at all levels. There is an increasing interest to participate in international programmes, both among students/pupils and teachers/professors/researchers/administrators. A lot of the activity is organised within the European exchange programmes. It is very important for Norway as a non-EU member to have access to these programmes. All educational activities on primary and secondary levels have to be free of charge for the pupils, including international activities. This means that the schools cannot organise study trips etc. if the pupils have to contribute financially themselves. Consequently, mobility activities in Norwegian schools must be financed through the European exchange programmes. Furthermore, they provide us with partners and networks that would otherwise be difficult to find. We hope that the EU will continue to develop and improve the programmes, as one of the most important measures to increase mobility in Europe. These improvements could include increased budgets, better coordination, more adequate requirements and less bureaucratic procedures.

Comenius is one of the most important programmes for our schools. Many schools report that they want more projects and a more active participation in the programme, but too often the applications are rejected. There seems to be a strong need for an increased budget, particularly in the Comenius programme, but also in Leonardo da Vinci. Other comments address the lack of coordination between the different countries. Some of our schools have experienced that their application has been rejected while as their partner school's application has been accepted, or vice versa. Naturally this creates a difficult situation for the partnership! It should be possible to avoid this by setting up a better system for cooperation between the national agencies. In multilateral school partnerships there is now more flexibility that allows the schools to spend a bigger share of the funding on mobilities. This is a very positive improvement! Many of our schools have commented that it would be useful to have more funding for bilateral cooperation. Bilateral partnerships are easier to develop and administer, and they can be a solid platform for cooperation activities in a long term perspective. Bilateral partnerships should be language oriented, but according to the Norwegian national agency this does not mean that only language pupils can be included. However, it is a common misconception that bilateral partnerships can only be related to language learning. The information to the schools should be more precise in order to avoid this misunderstanding. More funding for bilateral partnerships would improve the programme and make it more accessible for small schools with limited resources. In all the

programmes it is a requirement that the proposed project is innovative and not a copy or repetition of a previous project. This seems a little absurd when we talk about mobility projects - the individuals who will take part are not the same ones as the previous year, and if it is a good project the newcomers will benefit just as much as last year's pupils.

The application procedures are still too bureaucratic. Some schools might be reluctant to starting projects because the application process and the reporting are too complex and time consuming. There have been many improvements over the last few years, but the system should be further simplified. It would also be a good idea to have two application deadlines per year. This would increase the flexibility in the programme and make it more accessible.

- **Preparation of a mobility period**

How can the availability of information and guidance related to mobility be improved?

Even though there is a lot of information on the internet, continuous efforts should be made to develop more user-friendly websites that provide easy access to information on exchange opportunities. Many websites are focused on programme information and application guidelines. The target group is the institutions. There seems to be less focus on the student perspective. It should be a priority to develop internet portals that would give the students/pupils practical advice on how to prepare for a stay abroad, information on cultural differences, insurance, housing, etc.

Good websites are important, but the internet is not enough! There should be more focus on the information that is given in direct contact with young people. Advisers/programme administrators/motivators should meet young people in their daily environment and make sure that everybody is aware of the various mobility arrangements. The information has to be more targeted and differentiated. Firstly, you need to make sure that adults who work with young people have the necessary knowledge and competence that will enable them to give correct information and be good ambassadors. To get information about exchange opportunities should be a part of the general preparation for upper secondary and higher education. Internationalisation should be a part of the curriculum already in primary school, to ensure that children and youth are aware of the possibilities they have. It is also important to follow up on students/pupils when they return from a stay abroad. Previous exchange students are the best ambassadors and can do a great job in motivating others. Most of them are eager to share their experiences with other students, e.g. at information sessions, international days, etc.

What can be done to better promote and motivate young people to be mobile? How should this be done to ensure maximum effect? What do you see as the main barriers to the motivation of young people to become mobile?

It is important that young people have a short stay abroad at an early stage. Then they will get a taste of what an exchange period is all about. This could take away some of the general reluctance to go abroad, and plant an interest that would lead to other mobility activities later. The role of the teacher/tutor/adviser is extremely important! Anybody can be convinced if they meet an enthusiastic adviser.

Some of our schools have experienced that it can be more difficult to motivate pupils in vocational programmes to participate in international activities, both to go abroad themselves and

to welcome exchange students in their families. There are probably many reasons for this, but there might be a connection with their socio-cultural background and the encouragement, or lack of encouragement, they get from home. At the primary and secondary education level it is important to involve the parents and motivate them too!

Oppland county authority would like to initiate a project to find out more about the benefits of going abroad. The idea is to invite a student to do a master thesis on this topic. We “know” that an exchange period is positive in many ways, but there is very little documentation to prove it. The results of this project could be used to make young people aware of the positive effects of a stay abroad. If the Commission is interested in supporting the project, this is something that could be bigger than we have planned so far (e.g. cooperation with other regions).

In Norway there are many students who are interested in going abroad, but it is more difficult to get students to come here. Oppland county authority has a scholarship programme that is administered by the university colleges in the region. Through this programme students from the university colleges’ partner institutions can get scholarships to study in Norway. This will hopefully contribute to increased incoming mobility and a more balanced exchange.

How can the linguistic and cultural obstacles to mobility be best addressed?

Language training is essential, and there should be more hours dedicated to language training in the school system. To stimulate young people’s interest in languages they should be introduced to foreign languages already at a very early stage. Two primary schools in Oppland (Fredheim and Moen) have joined a project that is called “early start of second foreign language”. Through this project children get “language showers” as a first introduction to English, German, Spanish and French. The results are very positive. Research show that when you have learned a foreign language, it is more likely that you will continue and learn a second and a third foreign language. To start language training already in primary school can therefore be a very important measure to promote the interest of language learning.

Another example from Oppland is from a lower secondary school (Vinstra). They have decided to teach the social science classes in English. This will give the pupils a huge advantage when they go on to upper secondary school and higher education, and will probably lower the threshold for going abroad. The school’s problem is that it has been difficult to provide project funding, and as a consequence the implementation has been postponed. There are a lot of extra costs involved (e.g. translation of materials).

One of the upper secondary schools in Oppland, Vargstad, offers exchange periods in Germany for pupils in vocational programmes. They have focused on terminology that they need in their profession and set up Norwegian-English-German glossaries. With the three languages included this is a useful tool both for the Norwegian and the German pupils, as well as for the teachers.

What are the main legal obstacles to mobility that you have encountered? Can you provide examples of good practice in overcoming legal obstacles to mobility?

According to the Norwegian Act on primary and secondary education all educational activities should now be free of charge. Some schools have had the tradition of going abroad with whole classes, and it is not possible to finance this without personal contributions from the pupils. It has been established that this practice violates the act, and can no longer be maintained. This has

had a negative effect on internationalisation activities in many schools. On the other hand, it might lead to an increased focus on mobility within the framework of the European exchange programmes (but again, this is not very helpful if applications of good quality are rejected due to lack of funding).

The legislation on education is often not adapted to a new reality where internationalisation is, or should be, an integral part of the study programme. Some requirements, e.g. for hours of teaching in each subject, are very strict. If you were to follow them strictly, it would be very difficult to organise a stay abroad. You cannot expect the student/pupil to get the exact same academic content at a partner school abroad as they would have got at home. To count hours in every subject and compare the content down to every little detail, would make exchanges impossible. This is usually solved by the teachers' creativity and willingness to be flexible, but it might create problems. The legislation should be adjusted to make it easier to fit an exchange period into the education programmes. The system should not present an obstacle!

Visa issues can be a challenge, in particular for students from outside Europe (see below).

In many vocational programmes the pupils' safety is an important issue, and Norwegian schools have quite strict HES requirements (health, environment and safety). It is a problem when other countries have different standards. If the HES requirements are not met, exchanges cannot be organised.

What kind of obstacles have you encountered regarding the portability of grants and loans and access to benefits?

The State Educational Loan Fund in Norway provides loans and grants for studies abroad. This is a well functioning system that gives Norwegian students the possibility to study all over the world (exchange periods or full degrees). Differences in education systems can sometimes cause problems. One example is that the Loan Fund does not support the freshman year in the US system because it is considered as an equivalent to the final year of upper secondary education in the Norwegian system.

In most of the mobility programmes it is required that the duration of the exchange period is minimum three months. In some programmes, e.g. continuing education courses, it is more adequate to organise shorter periods abroad. Maybe there should be some funding available for these students as well?

What more should be done to promote mobility to and from the European Union? How should this be done?

Visa problems represent a major obstacle to mobility to and from Europe, in particular *to* Europe. Non-Europeans who want to study in Norway, must transfer NOK 87 600 to a Norwegian bank account before they can be granted a visa. The problem is that it is not possible to get a bank account in your name in a Norwegian bank before you have a Norwegian personal identification number, and it is not possible to apply for this until after your arrival in Norway. This system makes it very complicated for students from outside Europe to come to Norway for studies. The solution has been for the institutions of higher education to establish accounts where the students can transfer the money. Lists of the students who have paid the required amount are then being sent to the Directorate of Immigration.

It is important to have good cooperation and communication between the education institutions, the Directorate of Immigration and the local police stations. It is also necessary for the embassies and consulates to have competence on this! There have been many cases where the students have got information that is wrong or misleading.

What measures can be taken to ensure that the mobility period is of high quality?

Descriptions of exchange procedures (incl. selection, academic recognition, transfer of credits, etc.) should be a part of the institution's quality assurance system. The selection of exchange students should be based on more than an application and the student's academic results. Motivation and attendance should be important factors. At the university colleges in Oppland, all the students who apply for a semester abroad, are interviewed. This is time consuming, but it is an important step in ensuring the quality of the mobility. The international service office in Oppland, which organises mobility for apprentices, always consults the employers and put a lot of emphasis on their references.

The institutions have to put a lot of energy into the preparation phase. Successful mobility periods depend on good preparations! This includes language training, cultural competence, ethics, etc. The preparations have to be systematic, and the institutions have to follow up closely. Preparation of the project itself is also important. The schools need to visit their partners, but often they lack the necessary financial resources. There should be more funding available for preparatory visits. This would facilitate the establishment of school partnerships.

In Norwegian higher education the institutions are responsible for offering all students the possibility to go on exchange as a part of their study programme. To make mobility periods an alternative for everyone creates some dilemmas that should be discussed. What about the quality of the students? If everybody is given the chance to go abroad, that also includes the weak students. If they have difficulties following lectures and passing exams, these problems might get even bigger if they go abroad. Is it right to send everybody? Maybe some young people ought to find other types of mobility periods, besides the formal education system. Non-formal learning is equally important and maybe more suitable for some people, e.g. Youth in action.

Which are the most important difficulties encountered by disadvantaged groups with regard to learning mobility?

Immigrants can sometimes face problems if they want to go on exchange, e.g. if they have a residence permit that prevents them from travelling to another country. Disabled people can experience practical difficulties. They might need adults to go with them, and extra support has to be provided (Gjøvik municipality in Oppland has received such support through the Youth in action programme and has organised very successful exchanges for a group of disabled young people).

- **The stay abroad and follow-up**

Mentoring and integration – can you give some concrete examples of good practice in this area?

The university colleges in Oppland have a buddy system that ensures the social integration of incoming exchange students. The buddy system consists of a course with a partly academic and partly practical content. The students who are admitted to the course will get knowledge on internationalisation, cultural differences, intercultural dialogue and they will improve their organisational skills. During the course they will prepare the reception of the students, be responsible for the foreign students' introductory programme, plan and run activities, etc.

In secondary education it is a clear recommendation that accommodation is provided by host families. This makes integration easier and gives the pupils a lot more benefit from their stay abroad (cultural competence, language training, etc.). However, it can be difficult to find host families. Maybe there should be some incentives for host families as well?

Oppland county authority is responsible for offering apprentices the opportunity to go abroad. This mobility is not organised through a partner school. Mentoring and integration can therefore be more of a challenge in these cases. However, every apprentice has a mentor on-site who is responsible for following up, and the mentor stays in close contact with the mobility organiser in Oppland.

Is the validation and recognition of both formal and non-formal learning still a significant obstacle to mobility?

Recognition can be a problem, especially in profession oriented programmes like social work, nursing and engineering. These programmes have specific requirements laid down in national framework plans, and it is difficult for the institutions to adjust and to be flexible.

There has to be a better understanding of the concept "learning outcomes". What you get when you are abroad, is rarely exactly the same as you would have got at home. Maybe you will miss out on some topics, but you get other topics that might be just as relevant. In addition, you get cultural experiences and language competence. This should be valued more. The overall aim of education is to prepare for a professional career, and very often this career will be in an international environment. Academic knowledge is not enough! All the other skills are equally important and need to be recognized as such.

Comenius individual mobility is an interesting concept that will hopefully increase the individual mobility in upper secondary education and encourage more pupils to choose European schools (there is individual mobility today, but the majority of the pupils go to the USA and other English speaking countries). However, it is said that the period should be from three to ten months, and a period of just three months will be difficult to fit into the curriculum. The period should be either one term (semester) or a full school year. Otherwise the pupils will have to follow the curriculum at home while being abroad, and the benefit from the exchange period will be limited.

- **New partnership for mobility**

How can all actors and resources at national, regional and local levels be better mobilised in the interest of youth mobility? Can you provide examples of successful territorial partnerships? Can you provide good examples and innovative ideas on the funding of youth mobility?

Regional authorities could play an important role in coordinating the activities at a regional level and creating links between the different institutions and organisations. One of the most important tasks for Norwegian regional authorities is to promote regional development. Internationalisation has probably not been a big part of this, but could very well be defined as a central element of regional development. To consider international work as a part of this area of responsibility would make it easier for the regional authorities to take on a coordinating role.

Oppland county authority has established a regional office for apprentices who wish to take a part of their training abroad. This has been a big success. The exchanges are financed through the Leonardo programme, and the office is responsible for information, individual guidance, submitting applications, preparing the apprentices, contact with businesses abroad, following up on each student while they are abroad, reporting to the programme, etc. This office has now expanded to being a joint project with the neighbouring county, Hedmark. They have developed specialist competence on the Leonardo programme and have succeeded in increasing the activity every year since the office was established.

In a small country like Norway it is also important to have national networks to exchange knowledge and ideas. The Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Higher Education (SIU) is a public Norwegian agency that promotes international cooperation in education and research. SIU is an important partner for education institutions at all levels and functions as a centre for both programme administration and competence development.

How can businesses be motivated to become more strongly involved in youth mobility?

Some education programmes have compulsory periods of practical training. Many students are interested in an apprenticeship abroad, but it can be very difficult to find placements. Linguistic problems can be a challenge. In some businesses, communication with clients is essential. Even so, the business sector should be more open to receiving students and pupils from abroad.

When apprentices go abroad on exchange, it would be a good idea for their employer at home to visit them during the exchange. This would give the business the chance to build networks and might make them more willing to receiving apprentices as well.

How can we best make use of ICTs to provide valuable virtual mobility opportunities to enrich the physical mobility? Can the eTwinning approach be used in other learning sectors e.g. voluntary services, vocational sector?

We have already mentioned the importance of meeting young people where they are – in their daily environment. This also includes the new social media (Facebook, Twitter etc.) which could be used more effectively to promote mobility and to create networks and contacts across borders.

However, virtual “mobility” can never replace actual mobility. It should be considered as a useful tool and a supplement to physical mobility (both before and after the actual physical mobility), not as a replacement. Virtual mobility can inspire more young people to take part in international exchanges, and should therefore be actively used as a promotional tool. eTwinning projects can be a very good way to start and develop contact with a partner school. After a successful eTwinning project the schools are more likely to continue and work on other projects together.

Should mobility opportunities for “multipliers” (teachers, trainers, youth workers, etc.) be given additional support and prominence in European programmes? What do you see as the main obstacles to a stronger engagement of teachers and trainers in promoting mobility?

In many cases internationalisation is still not considered a legitimate part of the teachers’ work. It is still something that is an addition to the “important” tasks. Often extra hours have to be put in, without pay. Internationalisation is time consuming and requires competence and special motivation. The “multipliers” are often very resourceful people with a strong engagement, but their energy burns out! It is important to spread the knowledge and the interest to more than just a few. The school management has to be strongly involved to make sure that necessary resources are allocated. This is also a responsibility for the school owner (municipalities, county authorities and state). It is important to create an atmosphere for internationalisation at the working place – an international spirit. Internationalisation has to be considered equally important as all the other tasks, and when the teachers have to work extra hours, this should be compensated.

It is not enough to motivate pupils to participate in exchanges - you also have to motivate the teachers. There should be more funding available for teachers who are interested in taking academic courses abroad. This would give them motivation to organise exchanges for their classes, and they would get the chance to build networks. For our schools it is often a big challenge to find room in the budget for hiring supply teachers. When a teacher goes abroad with a group of pupils or to take a course, the school has to find a stand-in, which is quite expensive. It should be possible to cover these extra expenses through the mobility programmes. Otherwise it will be difficult for many of our schools to participate actively and encourage teachers to go abroad.

Do you consider targets a useful tool in defining a mobility strategy and if so, at what level (European, national, institutional, sectoral, etc.?)

It can be useful to define targets, but it does not make sense if it is not followed by incentives. The targets must be defined by the same people who have the power to allocate resources. If the European Union aims at increasing the participation in exchange programmes and wants to set a defined target, they also have to increase the budgets and possibly change some of the programme requirements and procedures, to make the programmes more accessible and user-friendly.

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