



Empowering
young people



**Learning Mobilities across Europe for
(young) professionals within the network**

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About the YES Forum

Founded in 2002, YES Forum is a European network of organisations working with and for young people facing challenging situations. By promoting their social inclusion and developing their professional skills, we act to improve the life chances of vulnerable young people. YES Forum aims to create an environment where young people and youth professionals have equally accessible learning and work-related opportunities in Europe and beyond.

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Introduction

Learning mobility programmes are a vehicle for young people and young professionals to acquire an international experience in Europe, playing a pivotal role in fostering their skills' development and allowing them to professionally widen their competences and explore their talents. These opportunities not only enable them to broaden their professional skills and competencies but also contribute to their personal growth in an international context, transcending geographical boundaries.

During the COVID-19 pandemic young people and professionals had to postpone their learning mobility experience or switch into an online format, while others were compelled to cancel their intended plans. In the current post-pandemic context, learning mobilities have been rising again and mobility programmes and initiatives (e.g., Erasmus+, ALMA, European Voluntary Service, European Solidarity Corps) have continued providing learners with opportunities to travel and gain new learning and work experiences.

Acknowledging that mobility is at the heart of the EU, contributing to societal transformation, and in order to ensure that young people and professionals are not left behind, the YES Forum is committed to promoting inclusive learning opportunities which are accessible to youth, irrespective of their background and in particular reaching out to young people that have less opportunities and are disadvantaged. We provide quality mobility programmes for both professionals and disadvantaged young people, fostering their connections and enhancing soft skills which are essential for an improved employability. Through these initiatives, participants develop their self-esteem, confidence, critical thinking, and gain a deeper understanding of the European Union and the value of active citizenship. We collect testimonies of learners in mobility, which are rather samples. Though not being fully representative, our data gives us a first insight how young people and professionals experience learning mobilities in a transition to a post-pandemic context.

In this report, we identify challenges and articulate recommendations based on our experience obtained in the field of youth work, education and vocational training. We advocate for the implementation of these recommendations with the aim to redesign the eligibility criteria and application process in that direction as to ensure that learning mobilities become accessible and truly inclusive for disadvantaged youth or professionals and do not remain elitist programmes funding the mobility of privileged young people who can most likely afford themselves to work and travel across Europe.

Learning Mobilities – a mirage for disadvantaged young people?

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, learning mobilities were strongly disrupted. Strict containment measures such as mobility restrictions in the form of curfews, travel limitations, reintroduction of internal border controls in the Schengen area, among others, were a serious obstacle and had limited the learning mobility opportunities and implementation of mobility projects considerably. This in turn, led to a decrease of mobility experiences negatively affecting the learning mobility of young people.

In the post-pandemic transition, apart of the learning mobilities within our network, young people and professionals in Europe continue being supported to gain a learning experience through different financial EU instruments that contribute to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). One of such programmes is the ALMA¹ (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve) which targets young people neither in employment nor in education or training. This EU initiative aims to support the integration of most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people into the society through work or training opportunities since they have limited access to these for individual or structural reasons, such as disability, long-term unemployment, insufficient qualifications or skills, migration background, etc.

ALMA complements existing Erasmus+ programme in supporting mobility of young people. For example, the "DiscoverEU," as an action of the Erasmus+ programme, is one of the unique learning mobility schemes which targets in particular young people. This learning mobility instrument provides young Europeans with the chance to travel around Europe by rail and discover different EU cities and landscapes. This (solo or group) travel allows young people to explore and strengthen their European identity and enhance their knowledge on the EU, but it also helps them to build a European and cross-country network of people with whom they have met along this journey. Moreover, young participants are expected to develop their language and problem-solving skills, including their self-confidence and stress resistance² during this learning process while discovering Europe's diversity.

While the idea to promote the European project among the youth through providing them with the opportunity to travel and gain first-hand experience is to be applauded, the application and eligible rules however pose barriers and discriminate different groups of young people and in particular push already disadvantaged youth further to the margins with limited chances to have equal access to the benefits of such learning mobilities. These underrepresented groups experience hence additional exclusion and discrimination which collides with the European Commissions' headline targets to be achieved within the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) framework in the areas of social protection, employment and skills. The right to inclusive education, training and lifelong learning is considered as one of the first EPSR principles to which every EU citizen is entitled.

In this context, it is also paramount that skilled professionals, such as social or youth workers, support young disadvantaged people in the entire mobility application and implementation process. Therefore, trained staff are required to have experience in working with young disadvantaged people and be aware of their broad range of needs, from psycho-pedagogical aspects, equality, gender mentoring, interculturality and up to language competence. Therefore, YES Forum's activities, from advocacy to capacity building and mobility opportunities, take concrete actions to support young vulnerable people

¹ European Commission (2023) ALMA: an active inclusion initiative for young people. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1549&langId=en>.

² European Youth Portal (2023) "Is there some kind of recognition?" Available at [Frequently Asked Questions | European Youth Portal \(europa.eu\)](#)

and professionals working with them. By targeting both young people and professionals we ensure an effective implementation of the EPSR.

Barriers of Inclusivity in Learning Mobilities

Socio-economic background

Within our network we have experienced that young people are more likely to participate in short-termed mobility opportunities for attending a conference or project events, when their entire travel and accommodations costs are covered. Despite the economic background, this approach enables even to the most disadvantaged ones to seize the opportunity of obtaining their very first mobility experience. For example, many young participants reported of having travelled for the first time to Brussels, visiting the European Quarter or even speaking to a Member of European Parliament has been an exclusive experience for many young participants of the YES Forum events.

In contrast, for participating in EU mobility schemes for travel one of the most dominant barriers for disadvantaged youth and professionals is the financial background. Disadvantaged youth and in particular NEETs (young people neither in employment nor in education or training) often do not have an income or the financial means to travel in general. For example, "EUDiscover" is a very competitive programme which since 2018 has received applications from more than 1 million young people, but only 248,000 of them had the opportunity to obtain travel passes.³ A young professional of our network, clearly articulated that for participating at this programme "the budget is insufficient to cover expenses." In case young people do not have a basic health insurance that covers them during their journey, they are compelled to pay for an additional private insurance, which adds up to the costs that participants have to cover themselves. Very often families neither have the possibility to financially support such a learning mobility for their disadvantaged youth and even discourage⁴ young people from doing so. In this situation, the economic background or the missing financial means becomes an unsurmountable barrier for youth experiencing lack of income or poverty.

From the perspective of gender and compared to their male counterpart, young women seem to be more negatively affected by financial obstacles which hinder their mobility.⁵ Having access to equal opportunities or learning mobilities irrespective of background remains for this group of young people an empty promise. These young people are compelled due to their limited financial means to refrain from

³ European Commission (2023) What is DiscoverEU? Available at https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/0319_YOUTH_2021-12_DiscoverEU_factsheet_2804.pdf.

⁴ European Commission (2023) Study on learning mobility. Available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/768f5373-82b5-11ee-99ba-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-296439608>, p. 95.

⁵ Ibid. p.100

applying to such mobility programmes and miss out on an excellent opportunity which would have provided them with an enriching experience on the personal and professional level.

But also, when participating in work mobility schemes such as ALMA, disadvantaged youth face financial challenges. In particular, NEETs, young people in care, and / or single parents who have family obligations⁶ hesitate to be involved in a learning mobility programme, as they are unable to afford their families' housing costs in their home-country and their own living costs at the new workplace. The risk of losing access to needed social benefits during their stay abroad and the bureaucratic barriers to re-enter the social or unemployment scheme might hinder them to become part of such mobilities.

For disadvantaged youth, the financial barrier and bureaucratic hurdles negatively impact their motivation to take the initiative to participate in mobility programmes. Such barriers reinforce the existing social injustice, discrimination and isolation of young people. Inequality from the economic perspective is a hindrance or separating element in these cases, fuelling the distrust in the European project and a feeling of being left behind.

Limited knowledge, skills or ability

In general, application processes for mobility programmes are complex and lengthy. Often the selection process of applicants is undertaken via an online registration tool, which assumes that every young person has access to the internet and the necessary digital skills to navigate through such an application portal. Young people who do not possess the access and the needed skills are in this case discriminated and hence less likely to apply for such programmes. The design of the application can be intimidating for them, especially if they lack experience in formal procedures and bureaucracy.

Moreover, language is often a crucial barrier that young people may face when travelling or working abroad. Our member organisations report "that disadvantaged youth who have not been abroad before or speak very little foreign language other than their mother tongue have great barriers to European mobility". For disadvantaged youth, even if they can send out an application in their own native language, travelling across Europe without speaking at least one of the big languages can be frightening. Travelling to places and living in a new country they have never been before and not being able to communicate in a foreign language can have negative implications for their safety, interaction with the local people, and cultural understanding, thus limiting the richness of the learning experience. Hence, language may exclude young professionals and disadvantaged youth from participating in EU mobility schemes as well.

According to the latest European Parliament Youth Survey 2021, young people confirmed that their level of understanding the European Union (EU) is low and it is alarming that a majority (55%) of respondents say they don't understand much or anything about the EU. Thus, knowledge is another challenge for the participation of young people and professionals in EU mobility programmes, and in particular

⁶ European Commission (2023) Study on learning mobility. Available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/768f5373-82b5-11ee-99ba-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-296439608>,

“EUDiscover”. For example, young applicants are required to fill out a quiz and answer five multiple choice question on general knowledge about the EU and its initiatives for young people, including a subsidiary question. Applicants with the correct responses and with the answer closest to the subsidiary question⁷ are selected to participate in the mobility scheme of “DiscoverEU.” Young professionals and disadvantaged youth may not be aware⁸ that such programmes exist and may not have been intensively exposed to EU information, hence they might have a lower level of knowledge about the EU. Others may have the information but opt not to seize these opportunities as they may not fully understand the benefits of learning mobility experiences. In these instances, the lack of knowledge or information on the EU, the mobility schemes and the benefits these programmes entail may pose a hindrance to young people’s and professionals’ participation in learning mobilities.

Eligibility

Another particular requirement for young people to participate at “DiscoverEU” is their age. In the European Youth Portal, it is explained that it has been the European Parliament which decided on the eligible age and put the focus on youth who are 18.⁹ This is an interesting aspect especially when considering that teenagers from the age of 16 are allowed to vote in European elections. Would it not be beneficial for these young voters to explore and experience Europe through “DiscoverEU” and enhance their knowledge on the EU and what it stands for? In that way, young voters under the age of 18 would reinforce their European values and identity, increasing their pro-European sentiments, solidarity and gain hands-on experience on the interconnectedness of European states.

Such learning mobility programmes could be interesting for youth work as well, if the eligible criteria of age would be widened to include the entire European youth between the age of 14 to 30.¹⁰ It would allow organisations to support the application of a group of vulnerable young people and accompany them during this learning experience. This structured and accompanied application and implementation would dismantle barriers disadvantaged young people face when individually applying to European mobility programmes.

Moreover, the limitation to the age of eighteen does not reflect the diversity of the youth’s reality and different life stages. If we look at the data, it is not a surprise that 70% of “DiscoverEU” participants are still at school. Youth who are in vocational training (3.9%) or employed (0.9%) comprise a contrasting

⁷ European Youth Portal (2023) Frequently Asked Questions. Available at [Frequently Asked Questions | European Youth Portal \(europa.eu\)](https://european-youth-portal.eu/faq)

⁸ YES Forum (2023) Learning opportunities (learning mobility) abroad in Europe for everyone – feedback from the field. Available at <https://www.yes-forum.eu/site/assets/files/2008/2023positionpaper-learningopportunities.pdf> and also European Commission (2023) Study on learning mobility. Available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/768f5373-82b5-11ee-99ba-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-296439608>, p. 97-98

⁹ European Youth Portal (2023) “Why is DiscoverEU only accessible to young people aged 18 years old?” Available at [Frequently Asked Questions | European Youth Portal \(europa.eu\)](https://european-youth-portal.eu/faq)

¹⁰ Bayerischer Jugendring (2018) „Politik mit jungen Europäer_innen,” Available at [Politik mit jungen Europäer_innen \(bjr.de\)](https://www.bjr.de/politik-mit-jungen-europaerinnen)

minority, when compared to the biggest group of participants. It is striking that “DiscoverEU” confirms the minimum inclusion of participants that belong to NEETs. The statistics for the application round March 2023 show that 3.6% of youth that are on a gap year, volunteering (0,7%), or unemployed youth (0.5%) were selected to participate in this programme.¹¹ This undoubtedly amplifies the urgency for redesigning the programme to respond to the needs of disadvantaged groups by removing legal and administrative obstacles for participating at such travel mobility programmes.

Recommendations to remove mobility barriers

This section is dedicated to recommendations concerning learning mobilities and are based on the experience of young participants of learning mobilities and our network’s youth professionals and youth work organisations who work with young people from various backgrounds. Considering that inclusion is a horizontal priority in the activities of the YES Forum, these recommendations are based on our collective experience as a network and focus on how learning mobilities can adopt more inclusive approaches to ensure that young people seize the opportunity to benefit from the existing programmes.

Invest more in inclusion and accessibility

It is vital when designing mobility programmes to make them inclusive for all, recognizing and comprehending that participants of mobility schemes may have different economic backgrounds and social context. In order to ensure that mobility programmes are accessible to a broad range of participants – and in particular disadvantaged ones - and promote equal opportunities for young people and professionals, we consider that it is crucial to address and remove financial barriers, as this contributes to a more inclusive and equitable society in Europe. One approach could be to provide additional funding targeting in particular young people who lack the economic means to participate in a learning mobility. For mobility programmes such as the “DiscoverEU” to not remain elitist, additional financial support is considered a paramount pre-condition.¹²

The establishment of support systems is another way how to assist young professionals that most likely would not be part of a mobility scheme due to financial constraints. For disadvantaged youth and professionals facing financial difficulties additional funding for covering their accommodation, travel and health insurance costs should be made available and easily accessible in the application and implementation process. Therefore, we consider that addressing financial barriers of mobility applicants and participants is urgent for making Europe fair, social and fostering a more inclusive environment for young people and professionals in the context of mobility programmes.

¹¹ European Youth Portal (2023) “DiscoverEU,” Available at https://youth.europa.eu/d8/sites/default/files/inline-files/0319_YOUTH_2021-12_DiscoverEU_factsheet_2804.pdf

¹² Erasmus Student Network. „More Erasmus for More People, but not enough investment,” Available at [reaction_of_the_erasmus_student_network_to_the_new_erasmus_programme.pdf \(esn.org\)](https://www.esn.org/~/media/Erasmus/StudentNetwork/2022/Reaction_of_the_erasmus_student_network_to_the_new_erasmus_programme.pdf)

Additional support for specific groups

The experience of our network has shown that disadvantaged youth often hesitate to participate on an individual basis in a mobility programme. For them “going abroad alone is a very big hurdle.” This youth’s lack of missing self-independence for participating in mobility programmes is in line with the results of European Commission’s Flash Eurobarometer 502 on the examined individual obstacles.¹³ What has been a positive experience of our member organisations is that travelling “with young people and youth workers together” has worked well and encouraged young people to participate in learning mobilities. Therefore, European mobility programmes should allow youth workers, regardless of their age, to accompany specific groups in need of external support. Although learning mobility programmes such as “DiscoverEU” encourage professional accompanying procedures, it does not cover all of their expenses. In this context, we advocate for solid funding to financing the accompaniment of disadvantaged youth.

Youth and social workers can take the role of mentors. Providing sufficient funding for mentoring mobility programme participants throughout the entire process is another approach how inclusion barriers can be dismantled. These mentors provide tailored support and guidance in the application and implementation process, empower disadvantaged young people or serve as career development consultants for young professionals. With this support and guidance young people and professionals would feel more secure and motivated to become part of a mobility programme.

Readjust the eligible criteria to reduce discrimination

Learning mobilities not only contribute to an enhanced social cohesion but also help build intra-European bridges, strengthening cross-border or transnational European cooperation. Mobility opportunities also reinforce the feeling of European belonging and solidarity. These programmes can be utilised as well to inform young EU citizens about the value of active citizenship and participatory democracy in the European Union. For young European (e.g. from Belgium, Germany, Austria), who are allowed to cast their vote during the next European elections in 2024 from the age of 16, learning mobilities experience across Europe may bring the EU closer to them and empower them to contribute to building a fairer Europe and embracing diversity and multicultural environments. Well-informed future voters who represent young generations know their rights as EU citizens, are aware of their vote’s impact and more likely to engage and participate in the civic space as an active citizen. Therefore, eligibility criteria for learning mobility programmes should readjust their age-restrictions and widen the age-criteria, allowing youth from the age of 16 to experience Europe through travelling across different member states.

¹³ European Commission (2023) Study on learning mobility. Available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/768f5373-82b5-11ee-99ba-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-296439608>, p. 95.

Digital learning replacing on-site experiences?

Undoubtedly, the pandemic inspired us to think of new ways and formats to implement the learning opportunities and accelerated the shift to using digital formats and removed some barriers. While on one hand this new digital approach has allowed an increased number of participants to seize the online learning opportunities, on the other hand it has led to other disadvantages such as the digital gap as a different form of marginalisation.

Considering the opinions and reflections of young people and youth and social work professionals involved in different mobilities within our network, one of the main lessons learned from the restricted movement and mobility has been that the on-site experience is irreplaceable.¹⁴ The quality of exchange and networking opportunities that an on-site event provides, including the intercultural experience and social activities does not equal to the experiences of online events.

Non-digital learning mobilities allows the participants to immerse themselves in a new environment, gain first-hand experience in a new culture and language by interacting with new people or locals and broaden their horizon and network, so that they learn more about the social dynamics and nuances of the local culture or the people they meet. This depth of personal connections, richness and finesse of experiences cannot be fully lived in the digital space. The soft skills and intercultural competence needed for personal and professional development are best developed through lived experiences on the field.

Digital mobility cannot fully replace the diversity of experiences gained from exposure to different countries, encounters and exchanges in the real world out there. Nonetheless, as our mobility participants pointed out that “we shall not forget all the knowledge gathered through the online activities from the past three years! The new, online, efficient tools for communication and learning developed during the pandemic are valuable and should not be lost.” Therefore, we advocate for a combination of digital learning mobilities and face-to-face or on-site transnational learning experiences since this balanced approach can provide a more comprehensive and enriching mobility experience.

There is no doubt on the positive and lasting impact of learning mobility on the lives of young people, however in times of climate change, learning mobilities need to converge with our environmental protection and sustainability goals.¹⁵ Nonetheless, our strive for a sustainable and environmental-friendly mobility should not reduce to a minimum the opportunities for exploring Europe and connecting to people across Europe in the non-digital context. Although, we continue advocating for learning mobilities on-site – in combination with digital learning – however, this does not take away the

¹⁴ Iliana Petsa and Olatz Alonso (2022) The value of learning mobilities in a post-pandemic context. Available at https://www.yes-forum.eu/site/assets/files/2010/d4_1_learning_mobilities_report2022.pdf

¹⁵ Ondřej Bárta and Marzena Ples (2021). “Sustainability in learning mobility: an exploratory study,” Available at https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261800/Sustainability+in+Learning+Mobility_Exploratory+Study+by+B%C3%A1rta+Ples.pdf/fef158f2-5309-5156-f571-da65253095e1

responsibility of institutions, organisations and individuals to make sure that physical learning mobilities are implemented in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Conclusion

Learning mobilities have undeniably a great impact on the personal and professional life of young people and are invaluable for the skills development of young people and social workers, especially for those who have access and can seize such learning opportunities. Our advocacy work is predominantly directed on making learning mobilities more accessible to disadvantaged young people, so that we enhance their inclusion in such actions.

As shown in the report and from the experience of young participants of learning mobilities and our network's youth professionals and youth work organisations, young people and professionals face different obstacles which may hinder them from taking part in mobility programmes. In order to remove the barriers stemming from the young people's economic background, limited knowledge, skills or ability, but also discrimination related to age we recommend an increase of EU investment in inclusion and accessibility, to provide and fund additional support for specific groups in forms of accompaniment and mentoring, but also to redesign the mobility schemes and readjust the eligible criteria in order to reduce discrimination. We consider that digital learning should not fully replace physical mobility experiences, instead we recommend a balanced approach of combining both analogue and digital learning that are environmentally sustainable.

The implementation of these recommendations would contribute to make learning mobilities across Europe accessible and inclusive for young people (especially young NEETs). Moreover, it would help them overcome systemic or personal obstacles that prevent them from obtaining a learning experience which serves them personally and professionally. This in turn, would contribute to making Europe a fair and social place for living and working.

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