Barriers of Mobility - Visa Issues for Non-EU Students

Policy Paper

Addressing Visa Barriers for Non-EU Students in Mobility

2025

Introduction

Addressing Visa Barriers for Non-EU Students: Facilitating Mobility through Policy Improvements

In today's globalised world, the importance of education and cultural experiences is increasingly felt. Studying abroad, in particular, not only provides students with an opportunity to improve their academic skills but also offers the chance to meet different cultures and gain a global perspective. In this context, the European Union has become a leader in international mobility through its programmes that promote education and cultural exchange. Historically, the Erasmus Programme (1987), one of the oldest initiatives for student mobility, still opens important doors for young people today.

However, one of the biggest obstacles faced by students who wish to realise this dream is the significant challenges associated with visa procedures. Students and volunteers who have the right to participate in Erasmus+ Programme, ESC, ESN Events (Erasmus Student Network Events), and other programmes, international education and volunteering opportunities are at risk of missing out on these opportunities due to complex, lengthy, and sometimes unclear visa procedures. This issue is particularly a major obstacle for non-EU students wishing to study in Europe. Yet, it should be remembered that education should not be confined by passports

It must not be forgotten that ''Erasmus+ is not only an educational programme but also a tool that fosters intercultural understanding, builds bridges between cultures, and strengthens shared values among European and non-European youth.'' (European Commission, Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2024). The current visa barriers, however, contradict this very

understanding. Students or volunteers who have earned the right to participate cannot be subjected to an unequal process simply because of the colour of their passports.

This policy document aims to address the multifaceted barriers encountered by non-EU students and volunteers participating in the Erasmus+ Programme, ESC, ESN events, and other programmes, with a particular focus on the challenges related to visa procedures, and to discuss the steps that should be taken to improve their experience. Data from ESN Turkey's comprehensive research titled "Barriers of Mobility – Visa Issues for Non-EU Students" reveal that the complexity and long processing times of visa procedures disrupt the mobility plans of students and volunteers. By providing solution suggestions for students and volunteers who have gained access to the same education or event, this document seeks to help overcome these barriers.

Policy recommendations are necessary to ensure equal opportunities in education, guarantee non-EU students' equal access to educational opportunities, and promote global mobility. The implementation of this policy will help eliminate the visa barriers that students face, while also reinforcing Europe's global leadership in education.

This document is aimed at a broad target audience, including national governments, universities, NGOs, international student organisations, and policymakers. These groups can generate solutions to ensure equal opportunities in education, increase student and volunteer mobility, and remove the visa barriers faced by non-EU students. Furthermore, we are ready to collaborate with numerous partners to achieve our shared goals.

Key Findings from the Survey

The survey titled as [Barriers of Mobility: Visa Issues for Non-EU Students](#) conducted by ESN Türkiye highlights several critical barriers faced by non-EU students during visa processes:

- **Long-Term Visa Requirement**

Approximately 92.3% indicated that they required a long-term visa, while around 7.7% stated that they did not.

- **Level Of Information During the Visa Process**

Approximately 12.5% reported that they had not received any information from their sending institution, while around 18.2% stated that they had not been informed at all by their host institution.

- **Visa Approval Times**

Approximately 25% of respondents described the process as "lengthy but acceptable", while 24% considered it "reasonable". A further 16% stated that the process was "quick and efficient", whereas the largest proportion, 35%, characterised it as "unreasonably long". This indicates a significant level of dissatisfaction with the visa application process.

- **Visa Processing Duration**

Approximately 30% stated that the visa process lasted less than 2 weeks, 34% reported that it took between 2 and 4 weeks, 15% indicated a duration of 4 to 8 weeks, and 20% completed the process in more than 8 weeks.

- **Residence Permit:**

50.8% stated that a residence permit is required.

- **Institutional Support:**

The total percentage of those who stated that they did not feel well-informed and prepared by the sending institution: 22.6%.

The total percentage of those who stated that they were not informed at all by the sending institution: 26.7%.

The total percentage of those who stated that they did not feel well-informed and prepared by the host institution: 33.7%.

The total percentage of those who stated that they were not informed at all by the host institution: 25.9%.

- **Visa Rejection Reasons for Erasmus+ Programme**

*"**Insufficient Documentation**" emerged as the most prevalent reason for visa rejection, with 111 instances, accounting for approximately 21.9% of the responses.*

*"**Financial Reasons**" followed closely, cited in 63 instances, representing around 12.4% of the responses.*

*"**Incomplete Application**" was another significant factor, reported 20 times, comprising about 3.9% of the responses.*

*Other reasons, such as **"Financial Insufficiency"** and **"Lack of Travel History"**, were also notable, with 19 and 12 instances, respectively, representing about 3.7% and 2.4% of the responses.*

*An interesting finding was that a substantial number of respondents (579 instances) reported **"Nothing"** as the reason for visa rejection.*

- **Challenges Posed by Visa Requirements for Non-Eu Participants:**

Approximately 76% stated that visa-related issues acted as a barrier to non-EU students applying for mobility programmes.

- **Effect of Visa Issues:**

Approximately 42.8% stated that the visa process negatively affected their experience.

- **Program Recommendation Inquiry Within the Framework of Mobility Barriers**

Approximately 65.4% expressed a willingness to recommend the programme.

Approximately 10.3% stated that they would not recommend the programme.

Approximately 24.3% indicated that they were undecided on this matter.

- **Visa Refusal Alternative Plan:**

21.2% have alternative plans in case of visa refusal.

78.8% do not have alternative plans in case of visa refusal.

Analysis of Affected Sides

a. Students and Volunteers:

Erasmus students, international students, and volunteers miss out on academic or cultural exchange opportunities when they are unable to participate in international mobility programmes or events. This situation directly affects both their academic development and global competencies, causing them to fall behind in their educational processes.

Additionally, delays in visa procedures lead to academic term losses for students, disrupting their study plans. Long and uncertain visa procedures place both psychological and financial pressure on students and volunteers, raising their stress levels.

In this context, it should be emphasised that mobility must be inclusive for every student and volunteer, and it is essential to provide them with sufficient support.

b. Universities:

The challenges faced during the visa process do not only affect students, but also universities directly. When students wishing to participate in mobility programmes are hindered by visa issues and forced to withdraw, it reduces the academic and cultural diversity of universities and lowers the proportion of international students.

Furthermore, inter-university collaborations largely rely on student mobility, and low visa approval rates disrupt these partnerships. Specifically, agreements made under programmes like Erasmus+ aim to promote student and academic staff exchanges; however, the difficulties within visa procedures undermine the sustainability of these international partnerships.

The European Union's "EU Strategy for Universities" (2022) emphasises the need for European universities to become more international and prioritises increasing mobility. Additionally, the "Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE)" (2021) states the importance of providing assistance related to obtaining visas for both incoming and outgoing mobile participants. However, the current visa procedures contradict these goals and weaken Europe's global competitive edge in higher education.

c. Employers:

Access to international talent presents a significant opportunity for employers; however, long and complex visa processes make it challenging to capitalise on this opportunity. In particular, students planning to undertake internships under programmes like Erasmus+ are unable to participate in employers' programmes due to uncertainties in the visa process, which can disrupt companies' planning.

d. European Union:

The complexity of visa processes poses significant long-term risks for the European Union and its member states. If students turn to alternative regions, Europe may lose its appeal in international education.

"...the European Commission's target of at least 350,000 learners from outside the EU coming to study and obtain a degree at the tertiary level in the EU by 2030 (ESN, *Erasmus programme has avenue for a competitive and prepared future*, 2025)." This goal highlights Europe's growing commitment to becoming a global leader in higher education and attracting talent from all around the world.

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) aims to make Europe a global academic hub. The main goal of the Working Group is to develop an EHEA Action Plan on Internationalisation and Mobility that:

- Supports the EHEA members in developing and implementing internationalisation policies that enable all learners to acquire international and intercultural competencies.
- Fosters a discussion of EHEA mobility targets in light of greatly varying mobility numbers in different countries, between credit and degree mobility and different cycles, and identifies the barriers to mobility as well as offering recommendations for the removal of these barriers. (European Higher Education Area, *Working Group on Internationalisation and Mobility*, 2024-2027)

Problem Definition and Historical Background

Programmes like Erasmus+ and ESC are key components of the EU's global "soft power" strategy. Therefore, although these programmes are designed to promote intercultural cooperation and educational exchange, the bureaucratic complexities of visa processes have persisted. Over time, changes in immigration policies, security measures, and administrative procedures across EU member states have created additional layers of complexity for students from non-EU countries. Despite efforts to standardise visa requirements under EU Visa Code, inconsistencies between member states continue to present significant challenges.

-2000s:

Since the early 2000s, the European Commission has undertaken reforms such as the Bologna Process to make Europe more attractive to international students. The Bologna Process (1999) aimed to harmonise higher education systems across Europe and encourage student mobility. With the EU's major enlargement wave in 2004, the Erasmus+ programme became more inclusive; however, visa barriers for students from non-EU countries persisted. These barriers continued to vary significantly, especially since each member state was left to decide its own national legislation. The EU Visa Code regulates the entry procedures for third-country nationals into the EU; however, inconsistent implementation among member states results in legal discrepancies. While some EU countries expedited student visa processes, others complicated the procedure due to stringent security policies. As a result, a common student visa policy within the EU could not be established.

-2016: Directive 2016/801 and Implementation Challenges

In 2016, the European Commission introduced Directive 2016/801, aiming to simplify visa processes for students and researchers. The directive sought to enable students from non-EU countries to obtain longer-term visas and facilitate access to employment opportunities within the EU after completing their studies. However, the uneven application of Directive 2016/801 among member states led to significant uncertainties for international students.

-2020 and Beyond (COVID-19 Pandemic)

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant delays in visa applications and made procedures more complex. Even after the pandemic, there have still been major delays in student visa applications within the EU. Consequently, during the post-pandemic recovery process, EU countries failed to implement sufficient reforms regarding student visas.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Standardisation of Visa Processes/Creation of Special Visa Categories, and Transparency**

Objective:

Students will no longer have to deal with different procedures in various countries, thereby reducing complexity. Furthermore, issues such as missing documents will be minimised, and standardised processes will enable visa applications to be processed more quickly, solving

time-related problems. A transparent process will increase the trust of both students and institutions. Therefore, a standardised application, approval process, and documentation system for visas should be established across EU countries.

Current Situation:

At present, there are no clear and distinct visa categories for students wishing to participate in education, internships, or volunteering programmes. This makes the process complex, time-consuming, and unpredictable, while also causing students to apply with unsuitable or general-purpose visa types. Another issue is the existence of different visa processes and documentation requirements across countries, creating an uncertain and opaque system.

Recommendation:

Each country should request the **same documents,** and the application process should be clearly defined. The **reasons for visa refusals** should be **clearly stated,** and the appeal process should be made more accessible. Therefore, binding common standards should be introduced to harmonise student and volunteer visa policies across EU countries. **Standard application and approval procedures for visas** should be established. In this regard, EU countries and Schengen Area countries should create **separate and specialised visa categories for students, interns, volunteers, and those participating in exchange programmes.** These categories should ensure the legal return of both students and volunteers, while also enhancing the accessibility of the process by simplifying document requirements, providing digital application options, and offering expedited processing times.

2. **Simplification of Long-Term Visa Procedures**

 Objective:

To ensure that students and volunteers receive their visa approvals more quickly. Reducing complex and unnecessary procedures will make the process easier. Simplifying visa processes will encourage more students and volunteers to apply for the programme.

Current Situation:

Visa applications are often delayed, the processes are unpredictable, and students are not provided with a clear timeline, which results in them missing the programme start dates. This uncertainty complicates planning for both students/volunteers and institutions, negatively impacting the effectiveness of Erasmus+ and other international programmes.

Recommendation:

"National authorities should simplify visa procedures for international students pursuing learning opportunities abroad. It is strongly recommended that visa policies be standardised to provide young students with a unified and streamlined application process and ensure they can travel after their applications are accepted (ESN, XV Edition of the ESNsurvey Report, 2024, p.124)." EU member states should simplify long-term visa procedures, granting students priority application rights. A common **"fast-track visa"** system should be developed for universities in EU countries, creating simplified processes for mobility programme participants. The visa application process for students participating in Erasmus and other mobility programmes should be expedited, with a reduction in bureaucratic barriers. National governments may be incentivised **to adopt this policy.** The introduction of a **one-year multiple-entry visa** for students and volunteers should be encouraged.

3. **Establishment of a Refund Mechanism in Case of Visa Refusal**

Objective:

To reduce the financial losses of students in the event of a visa refusal, encourage applications to mobility programmes, and ensure the system operates more fairly and transparently. This proposal would also help students and volunteers who are hesitant to apply due to fear of visa refusal, as the loss of application fees can be an additional barrier. This fear limits mobility for exchange programmes.

Current Situation:

Students or volunteers are faced with losing the application fee even though they do not receive any services during the application process.

Recommendation:

The European Union should make it a legal requirement for consulates to offer **partial or full refunds of application fees** in cases of visa refusals for applications made under Erasmus+ and ESC programmes.

4. Standardisation of Invitation Letters and Recognition of Official Priority

Objective:

To ensure that invitation letters sent within the framework of mobility programmes are recognised as official, reliable, and priority documents in the visa processes of both EU and non-EU countries.

Current Situation:

For student exchanges, Learning Agreements (LA) or Training Agreements (TA) are typically used. However, these documents are often not sufficient for visa purposes, and consulates may request an additional invitation letter. Similarly, invitation letters for internships and voluntary activities may differ significantly in content. Some consulates consider these letters inadequate and may request additional documents or official certifications.

Recommendation:

The format of "Invitation Letters" issued for education, internship, and volunteering programmes **should be standardised.** Where necessary, **QR codes or digital verification systems** should be added. Protocols should be established with countries to ensure that these standard invitation letters are accepted as **official priority documents** for specific mobility activities, and that they are recognised as official and priority visa documents.

5. Alternative Plans and Flexible Participation Timetable Proposal

Objective:

The aim is to prevent delays or complications in the visa process, such as difficulties in securing an appointment, extended processing times, or visa refusals, from negatively affecting students' participation in mobility programmes and academic schedules.

Current Situation:

Students may face difficulties in securing visa appointments, and there may be conflicts between appointment dates and programme start dates. Visa application processing times can be prolonged, preventing students from travelling as originally planned. Students who miss

programme start dates due to visa processing delays may experience disruptions to their academic schedules.

Recommendation:

Universities should develop **alternative plans for students** facing visa refusals or delays, and establish dedicated support mechanisms for these students. **Flexible participation dates for programmes** should be set for students experiencing visa issues, allowing them to align with their academic timelines and successfully participate in mobility programmes.

6. Digitalisation and Online Application Platforms

Objective:
The requirement for physical applications would be eliminated, allowing students to easily track the status of their applications. Participants would be able to upload their documents more easily and be instantly notified of any missing documents. Through digital platforms, everyone would have easier access to the process.

Current Situation:
Many visa application processes still require physical documents, and the application stages cannot be tracked online. Students may receive delayed information regarding missing documents or the status of their applications, which reduces the efficiency of the process.

Recommendation:
For all countries involved in the programmes, applications and process tracking should be provided through digital platforms, enabling students and volunteers **to upload their documents online and track the process in real-time.**

7. Support and Advisory Services Enhancement

Objective:

To ensure that students and volunteers are more informed at every stage of the visa process, thereby reducing the likelihood of submitting incomplete or incorrect documents.

Current Situation:

Currently, many students and volunteers may not fully understand the specific documentation required or the visa application process, leading to errors or delays. There is often a lack of clear, accessible guidance throughout the visa application process, and institutions may not

provide adequate support or timely updates. Furthermore, there is insufficient multilingual assistance available, which can create confusion, particularly for non-native speakers.

Recommendation:

Students should be provided with **more detailed information** regarding the required documents and process. **Training programmes** should be offered to sending and hosting institutions to improve support during the visa process. **Multilingual guides and resources** should be created for students who are navigating **visa and residence permit processes. Regular updates on visa requirements and deadlines** should be provided to ensure students stay informed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current issues with visa processes not only limit the mobility opportunities for students and volunteers but also negatively impact academic diversity and cultural richness within Europe. Programs such as Erasmus+ are a crucial part of the EU's goal to become a global centre for education and exchange. The Council Recommendation on Learning Mobility (2021) suggests increasing the mobility of students from non-EU countries. However, if visa barriers are not resolved, Erasmus+ and similar programmes will lose their appeal for students from outside the EU, and mobility rates will decline. This could lead to the failure of Europe's international student recruitment strategy.

At this point, if the challenges in visa processes continue, the problem will arise that individuals who have earned the same right will not be able to equally benefit from these opportunities. This is entirely contrary to the principle of fairness; students or volunteers who have secured the same mobility opportunity will not be able to benefit equally simply due to visa issues. However, programmes like Erasmus+ promise equal opportunities for all participants.

Erasmus+ is not only an educational programme but also a tool for supporting the EU's cultural diversity and inclusivity. The EU aims to enhance academic diversity. "Widening the association of non-EU countries to the European Education Area, especially those of the Western Balkans, is an integral part of the vision to achieve by 2025" (European Commission, 2020, *Achieving the European Education Area by 2025*, COM(2020) 625 final).

In conclusion, speeding up and simplifying visa processes is a critical step for Europe to maintain its international academic attractiveness and increase mobility rates. Removing visa barriers for students and volunteers from non-EU countries is crucial for supporting inclusivity, academic collaboration, and cultural exchange. Solving this issue requires coordinated efforts

between national governments, universities, NGOs, international student organisations, and policymakers. Harmonising visa policies, strengthening institutional support, and reducing bureaucratic obstacles will contribute to creating a more accessible and fair framework for mobility.

Call to Action

ESN Türkiye calls upon EU national governments, universities, NGOs, international student organisations, and policymakers to prioritize visa reform as an essential component of international education policy. By acting together, we can build a truly accessible and equitable mobility framework that benefits students and volunteers from diverse backgrounds.

References

European Commission, 2020, *Achieving the European Education Area by 2025*, COM(2020) 625 final

ESN, *Erasmus programme has avenue for a competitive and prepared future*, 2025)

https://www.esn.org/news/erasmus-programme-has-avenue-competitive-and-prepared-future

ESN&MSS&unimed, *The Future of Higher Education in the Mediterranean The Student's Perspective*, 2023

https://padlet.com/president308/education-sharebox-and4czysjsuc912d/wish/E851Q0ERxgBAZVAb

ESN, *ESNsurvey XV Edition, Making Quality Mobility a Reality for All*, 2024

https://www.esn.org/news/launch-xv-edition-esnsurvey-report

European Commission, *European Strategy for Universities*, p.18

https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-01/communication-european-strategy-for-universities-graphic-version.pdf?utm_source

European Commission, *Erasmus Charter for Higher Education 2021-2027*

https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/Erasmus-ECHE-certificat_vert-EN.pdf

European Higher Education Area, *Working Group on Internationalisation and Mobility*, 2024-202

https://ehea.info/page-WG-on-IM

European Commission, *Directive (EU), 2016/801, 2016*

European Commission, *Europe on the Move - a proposal on the future of learning mobility*, 2023

https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/europe-on-the-move-a-proposal-on-the-future-of-learning-mobility

European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025*, 2020

https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625

European Union, *Visa Code*, 2009

https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3Ajl0028