



Erasmus Plus: A Programme for Citizenship Education

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Abstract: This article examines Erasmus Plus as a pivotal European Union programme for fostering citizenship education. It argues that Erasmus+, extending beyond academic and professional development, plays a crucial role in cultivating active participation in democratic society, intercultural understanding, and a sense of European identity among participants across its diverse sectors (School Education, VET, Higher Education, Youth, Adult Education, and Sport). The article explores how international mobility, a core component of Erasmus+, transforms abstract civic concepts into tangible experiences, thereby developing essential intercultural skills, critical thinking, and global awareness. It highlights the synergistic "virtuous circle" between mobility experiences and formal/non-formal citizenship education. Furthermore, the article discusses the importance of "decentering"—the capacity to critically assess one's own culture from an external perspective—as a key outcome catalyzed by Erasmus+ experiences, drawing on insights from Nussbaum and Todorov. It concludes that Erasmus+ serves as a vital instrument in forging responsible, engaged, and critically aware global citizens prepared for an interconnected world, strengthening the foundations for a more cohesive and aware global society.

Keywords: Erasmus+, Citizenship Education, International Mobility, European Identity, Decentering.

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Introduction

Erasmus Plus, building upon the legacy of the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, represents a fundamental pillar of the European Union's efforts to promote education, youth, and sport across Europe. In 2014, a new project called Erasmus+ (Erasmus Plus) was launched, with the aim of combining all European mobility programs for education, traineeships, youth (from 13 years of age), and sport. The name "Erasmus" pays homage to Erasmus of Rotterdam, the renowned Dutch humanist who travelled extensively across Europe to learn about different cultures. More than just an academic or professional development initiative, participation in the Erasmus+ programme is designed to foster active participation in democratic society and deepen intercultural comprehension, significantly aided by language learning and an enhanced openness and adaptability crucial for the evolving world of work. Indeed, Erasmus+ is increasingly recognized as a powerful engine for cultivating European identity and active citizenship.

Erasmus+ offers significant opportunities for mobility and cooperation among individuals and across countries through projects in the following fields:

- **School Education:** Encompassing early childhood education and care, projects in this sector involve school leaders, teachers, and other school staff, as well as pupils at all levels. Such initiatives often focus on collaborative learning about shared European values, democratic school governance, or media literacy, directly contributing to early citizenship development.
- **Vocational Education and Training (VET):** Aimed at apprentices, students in vocational institutes, VET professionals, and trainers. Mobility here can expose learners to different work cultures and societal norms, fostering adaptability and an understanding of European labor rights and standards – key elements of economic and social citizenship.
- **Higher Education:** Including students across all three cycles (Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral degrees), academic and administrative staff, trainers, and professionals. International study and traineeships immerse participants in new socio-political contexts, encouraging critical reflection on governance, civic duties, and human rights.
- **Youth:** Targeting young people aged 13 to 30, youth workers, and organizations in the youth field. Youth



exchanges and non-formal learning activities are particularly potent in developing civic engagement, intercultural dialogue, solidarity, and democratic leadership skills.

- **Adult Education:** Designed for members of adult education organizations, trainers, staff, and adult learners. Projects can empower adults to become more active in their local communities, understand European issues, and engage in lifelong civic learning.
- **Sport:** For professionals and volunteers in the sports sector, including athletes and coaches. Initiatives promoting grassroots sport can instill values of fair play, teamwork, inclusion, and respect for rules, which are foundational to good citizenship.

Erasmus plus and Citizenship Education

Citizenship education has risen to prominence as an educational policy priority at the EU level. Its primary goal is to empower young people to develop self-awareness as members of social groups and, consequently, to encourage their active participation as citizens at local, national, or EU levels. Concurrently, EU Member States are increasingly emphasizing the teaching of values such as democracy and tolerance within their national educational policies, although systematic practical implementation is still evolving. School curricula reflect these educational policy priorities; the nature, scope, and time dedicated to citizenship education within these curricula indicate its relative importance. Erasmus+ projects often serve as a practical vehicle for implementing and enriching these national and EU-level citizenship education goals. The transformative power of international mobility, a core component of Erasmus+, is particularly evident in how it shapes individuals into informed and engaged citizens. Immersion in diverse cultures makes abstract concepts like rights, duties, and democracy concrete. International comparison matures the understanding of these principles, building conscious citizenship and developing intercultural skills (communication, empathy, respect), essential for multicultural societies. International mobility, as facilitated by Erasmus+ programs, cultivates European and global awareness. It stimulates critical thinking about one's own culture, strengthens resilience and open-mindedness, promoting active citizenship that transcends national borders. Observing the civic life of others—how local elections function, the dynamics of volunteering, or the expression of social movements—becomes a potent form of informal learning about citizenship in action. Citizenship education, whether formal or non-formal, provides the conceptual tools to interpret these immersive experiences, transforming

observation into structured learning and deeper understanding. It encourages active engagement during stays abroad, rather than passive observation, and prompts critical reflection on ethics, human rights, and social justice. In this way, international mobility and citizenship education create a virtuous circle. The former acts as a "living laboratory" where citizenship values can be experienced, tested, and profoundly internalized; the latter offers the "toolbox" of intellectual and ethical frameworks to maximize the formative potential of the experience. This dynamic interaction is crucial for forging open, competent, engaged, and responsible global citizens, who form the bedrock of a cohesive and understanding global society. The ambition of teaching intelligent global citizenship can appear daunting. As Nussbaum (2011, p. 97) notes, the goal seems so vast that "one is tempted to give up and declare that we would have done better to concern ourselves only with our own country." However, even the process of studying and understanding one's own nation thoroughly implies acquiring knowledge of the diverse groups and cultures that constitute it. In this context, the capacity for decentering becomes essential. As Todorov (2009, p. 87) eloquently states: "it is important – in other words – to value the moment when the individual becomes aware of their group's identity and becomes capable of observing it by putting themselves in the other's shoes; by doing so, they are able to critically analyze their own past, to grasp both traces of humanity and of barbarism. It is not possible to recognize one's own traditions and culture if one is not capable of taking a certain distance from them, which in no way coincides with systematic self-denigration and public flagellation, nor with the comfortable certainty of always having been right. It is rather a matter of replacing cries of pride and tears of repentance with questioning the causes and meaning of past events." The process of "decentering" described by Todorov is precisely what Erasmus+ mobility experiences often catalyze. By placing participants in new cultural and social contexts, the program encourages the critical self-reflection and nuanced understanding of oneself and others that are prerequisites for informed, empathetic, and responsible global citizenship. Thus, Erasmus+ transcends its role as a mere scheme for education, training, and youth development. It serves as a vital instrument in cultivating a European and global citizenry equipped to navigate an interconnected world not only with enhanced skills but with a deeper capacity for critical thought, intercultural dialogue, and a commitment to active participation in democratic life. It is through such experiential learning and reflective engagement that the foundations for a more cohesive, aware, and responsible global society are truly strengthened.

This questionnaire intends to acquire students' views regarding European citizenship and the Erasmus programme.

Erasmus+ and Active Citizenship: What do you think?
1. What is the European Union for you? (Open-ended question)
Have you ever heard of the Erasmus+ programme?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ .
2. What does being a "good citizen" mean to you? (Open-ended question)

3. Do you think it's important to feel part of a larger community, like the European one?
☐ Yes, very much
☐ Yes, quite a bit
☐ I don't know
☐ No, not particularly
☐ No, not at all
☐ Why? (Brief explanation)
(The following sentence from your Italian text is incomplete: "In che modo pensi che conoscere persone di altri paesi europei possa influenzare il tuo") Translating the incomplete fragment: In what way do you think knowing people from other European countries could influence your...
4. Do you think living in a cultural context different from yours can help you to:
☐ Understand others better? (Yes/No/Maybe)
☐ Become more open-minded? (Yes/No/Maybe)
☐ Develop the ability to solve problems in new ways? (Yes/No/Maybe)
5. Which of the following skills do you think can be most developed by participating in a programme like Erasmus+? (You can choose more than one)
☐ Communication in a foreign language
☐ Adaptability to new situations
☐ Ability to work in a team with different people
☐ Critical thinking
☐ Empathy and understanding of others
☐ Cultural awareness
☐ Sense of initiative
☐ Other:

Conclusion

In conclusion, Erasmus+ serves as a transformative force in education, fostering active citizenship and European identity through mobility and intercultural experiences. By immersing participants in new social and cultural environments, the program helps to develop critical thinking, adaptability, and a deeper understanding of democratic values and human rights. Citizenship education, both formal and informal, complements these experiences by providing the intellectual tools necessary for reflection and engagement.

Ultimately, Erasmus+ is more than an educational initiative—it is a gateway to global awareness and responsible citizenship. It equips individuals with the skills, knowledge, and ethical perspective required to contribute meaningfully to a more interconnected and cohesive world. By enabling participants to step beyond their own cultural frameworks and embrace diverse perspectives, Erasmus+ plays a crucial role in shaping the leaders and change-makers of tomorrow.

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