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## The importance of mobility for European youth

by Yves Bertoncini, Secretary General of Notre Europe

**Interview realised by H  l  ne Bourgeois, for an issue to be published of the review Cahiers de l'action of the French national institute for youth and common education ([INJEP](#)) dedicated to the European voluntary service (English translation by Notre Europe).**

**Is mobility a strategic issue for Europe? For national governments? How did a think tank like Notre Europe get hold of the question and now endeavours to propose recommendations in its favour?**

Yves Bertoncini has been Secretary General of *Notre Europe* since April 2011 and teaches European studies at IEP Paris and Corps des Mines (Mines Paris Tech.) He was a European Commission administrator, first at the DG Education, Training and Youth (1998-1999) then at the DG Regional Policy (1999–2001). He also worked on two occasions for the French Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, for the organisation of a national dialogue on Europe (1995– 1997) and at the French Embassy in Algiers (1992–1993). He was also Adviser to the Secretary General for European Affairs (2010-2011) and Special Adviser at the Strategic Analysis Centre, where he coordinated the cabinet report “Encouraging mobility of young people in Europe, Strategic orientations for France and the European Union” submitted in July 2008 in view of the forthcoming French Presidency of the European Council (report published by La documentation fran  aise). He is a member of the Steering Committee of the French-German Youth Office (FGYO).

**What is the specific nature of the European Voluntary Service (EVS) in comparison to other European programmes?**

All mobility programmes, beginning with Erasmus, created in 1987, are ambiguous concerning their objectives: do they have an economic vocation aiming to train mobile competitive workers or, a political vocation in order to generate a European feeling amongst young people?

Jacques Delors was highly committed to obtaining the launching of the Erasmus programme: Margaret Thatcher was against, she was opposed to the political dimension. Primarily, Erasmus was then created on an economic basis, in order to train the actors of the Common Market established by the Treaty of Rome thirty years previously.

The creation of the Leonardo, Grundtvig and Comenius programmes is part of the drive to contribute to the training and the flexibility of future workers, and they concern the framework of formal education. The European Voluntary Service is more difficult to define. It is the programme which has the strongest leanings towards civic and political objectives. For this reason, it must have drawn criticism, for example, the English cannot have liked it.

Programmes such as Erasmus, Leonardo or the EVS can “create” Europeans, i.e. people capable of thinking beyond their borders. But it is always difficult to justify massive European funding for this social reason, the creation of a “homo europeanus”, because countries and populations are divided over the existence of a European Union political identity. Criticism is also directed at the public

funding of youth movements. For some countries like Germany, the State does not necessarily have a role to play in this domain.

The advantage of “youth” programmes is that they are accessible as, when you are on a degree course, going abroad to study can also be a risk affecting the continuity and the quality of studies. If one were to pursue a utilitarian logic, it would be better to widen the possibilities for departures in non-formal education programmes, such as the EVS, during the summer period.

### **Why is mobility important for young people? Why encourage it?**

At the time of undertaking the report at the Strategic Analysis Centre, I encountered considerable scepticism concerning mobility programmes. Many people still associate the Erasmus programme, for example, with a holiday period.

Through my personal experience, I have been able to appreciate the full wealth of mobility. I studied for three months at the University of Berkeley in California, worked at the French Embassy in Algeria and spent one year at the College of Europe in Bruges. In Berkeley, in 1990, it was the first time I felt European. I shared my room with an Asian, some students whom I met could not place France on a map, I was therefore “European” and he was “Asian”. It was at the time of the Football World Cup in Italy. The only students watching the matches came from European countries: it was the first time in my life that I had taken part in a European gathering.

Travelling is highly formative as it enables the acquisition of several types of skills:

- firstly, linguistic skills which are absolutely essential and justify in themselves the importance of mobility for young people, especially when one perceives the poor level in languages of the French.
- secondly, intercultural skills, in order to try to understand the diversity and the way in which complex situations have to be untangled in intercultural exchanges.
- in addition, transversal skills, linked to autonomy, those that enable one to learn to get by far from home.
- finally, international skills, knowledge of the country which the young person visited, which will enable him/her to work there afterwards or to do business with it. These skills serve to widen job opportunities.

It is very difficult to acquire all these skills without international experience.

Mobility programmes are also a tool for the European Union seeking to create a “Europe” box among the beneficiaries. Today, it must no longer be a question of “for or against Europe” but rather what content for Europe. Mobility does not aim to produce “Europhiles”, in the sense of supporters of Brussels’ policies, but European citizens concerned by projects going beyond their borders. The more people are trained in foreign countries, the more they will be mobile, able to settle abroad, but also to participate in the debates of the European Union.

### **Does the *Notre Europe* think-tank lobby concerning mobility for young people?**

My predecessor, Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul knew the subject well: she wrote an excellent thesis on the creation of Erasmus<sup>1</sup> and acted on the issues at stake. We plan to support mobility programmes in

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<sup>1</sup> Nihoul Gaëtane, *Policy Formation in the European Union: the Case of Education Policy*, D.Phil. in European Politics and Society, Thesis, University of Oxford, 1999.

the autumn. We shall probably act first in Brussels as that is where lobbying takes place, then in other capitals, in order to make national actors more aware.

Today, mobility for young people does not seem to be a priority for the majority of French elected representatives. The example of Sciences Po is significant: without the initiative of Richard Descoings who made mobility compulsory in the third year, only a few students would have gone abroad each year. Such voluntarism must also be triggered outside Brussels.

### **What are your recommendations in favour of mobility?**

First of all, we need to prove its usefulness once again, stimulate young people's desire for mobility by showing them the advantages. It is important to be able to rely on research on the individual and collective impact of experiences of mobility.<sup>2</sup> This information needs to be made available to children and their families to show them just how it could be useful. We lack today case studies and scientific data, which demonstrate the positive effect of mobility on the pathways to integration for young people. In particular, we need more precise details concerning the chapter on employability.

If we then consider the financial aspect, obviously, more money is needed in European programmes: it would not be difficult to double them, to triple them or even to quadruple them, given the low budget they currently receive. Grants too, need to be increased beginning at national level. Universities receive an operating endowment which does not vary according to the number of students sent abroad. A proposition in favour of a flexible endowment in relation to the establishment's investment in its students' mobility could be put forward. Another issue: today when teachers undertake a school trip with their pupils, they have to be extremely motivated. They do not benefit from an increase in salary, are often not insured and sometimes must go away during their holidays. To encourage mobility, first of all mechanisms to encourage those involved in youth work to grasp them, need to be created.<sup>3</sup>

Accompanying elements are also important. Often, the student "embarks on an adventure", in most cases (the Erasmus programme), he/she has to manage by him/herself to find accommodation, to organise travel arrangements, to see about his /her course, or even to find a job. By not helping sufficiently young people to settle in, many of those without the resources to cope (financial, cultural, social...) are lost.

Finally, to widen the target, as we could never "generalise" mobility to all young people, we must widen the panel of possibilities of mobility, favour access to language-learning trips for example, which are today the reserve of an elite. There is a need for diversification of formulas, duration and in the types of this unique intercultural and international experience, so that everyone who wishes to experience it, is able to do so – which, already, would be an excellent result.

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<sup>2</sup> See notably Wolfgang Ilg and Judith Dubiski, *Les échanges ouvrent des perspectives. Un aperçu empirique des rencontres internationales de jeunes*, Paris/Berlin/Varsovie : Office franco-allemand pour la Jeunesse et Office germano-polonais pour la Jeunesse, 2011 (available in German, French and Polish).

<sup>3</sup> See Annick Bonnet, *La mobilité étudiante Erasmus. Apports et limites des études existantes*, Centre international d'études pédagogiques - Commande de l'Agence Europe Éducation Formation France, mars 2012.