



## Education and Labor Mobility

One of the central goals of the European Union (EU) has been to create a common or internal market based on the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital. However, while significant progress has been made towards facilitating the free movement of travelers, goods, capital, and services, the movement of workers (or labor mobility) has been more difficult to achieve. For instance, although cross-border and inter-regional mobility figures are considered promising (in 1999 1.4% of EU workforce moved to another region, while 0.4% commuted), geographic mobility between member states has to date been relatively low, with recent figures indicating that only 0.1% of EU workers had moved to another country in the previous year (1999). Similarly, occupational mobility in the EU has typically been comparatively low; in 2000, only 16.4% of workers in the EU had been with their employer less than a year. By contrast, comparative figures for the United States (US) labor market estimate geographic mobility at 5.9% in 1999, and occupational mobility at approximately 30% in 1996.

These low levels of mobility have caused concern among European leaders and businesses that this stagnancy may undermine Europe's competitiveness and inhibit the availability of skilled workers. Flexibility and mobility in the labor market are particularly important if the EU is to achieve the strategic goal that it set itself during the European Council in Lisbon in 2000, namely to become "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world" over the next decade. Therefore, as part of what has since come to be known as the Lisbon Strategy, the EU and its member states have developed a wide range of policies and goals to encourage and facilitate labor mobility (see [http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social) ).

European cooperation on education and training has been central to these efforts (and to the Lisbon Strategy as a whole), as considerable reforms are required in this policy area to remove the legal and administrative obstacles to geographical mobility, and to ensure the labor force has the necessary training and skills for occupational mobility in a knowledge-based economy. To identify and initiate the required reforms, the EU member states have agreed to a program of work for the next 10 years to be achieved by 2010 using the "open method of co-ordination" policy-making framework. Objective 3.4 of the program focuses specifically on mobility and exchange issues; a Working Group has been established to identify and prioritize associated issues. Furthermore, additional targets have been set under the European Commission's Action Plan on Skills & Mobility and the Bologna Process, a cooperation framework for higher education institutions.

## Mobility within Education Systems

Since the mid-1980s, the EU has developed a wide range of programs to promote the mobility of students and educational professionals between educational institutions in member states, the European Economic Area (EEA) states and candidate countries. Under the umbrella of the *Socrates* program, mobility programs are provided at all stages of the educational cycle, including *Erasmus* (higher education sector), *Comenius* (schools), *Grundtvig* (adult education), *Lingua* (language skills), and *Arion* (open and distance learning). In addition, the *Leonardo da Vinci* program facilitates mobility in the vocational training sector. These programs allow students and educators to study abroad and/or develop language learning skills, and for schools, universities and further education institutions to create pan-European networks.

Since their inception, there has been a steady increase in program participants. For instance, since 1987 over 1.2 million students have studied abroad under the auspices of the *Erasmus* program, and in 2004-2005, 2,199 higher education institutions in 31 countries are participating in *Erasmus*. EU support for the various programs is reflected in the substantial increase in funding allocated from the Community budget to these projects over the past 10 years (from €133 million in 1995 to €110 million in 2002). Additional funding is also provided by participating states, universities and other organizations. However, as yet, the numbers of participants remains relatively low. In 2002 only 1% of European higher education students availed of the *Erasmus* program, while significantly less than 1% of vocational education students participated in the *Leonardo da Vinci* program. Nonetheless, demand for these programs is expected to grow, and political and financial support remains in place.

The low rates of transnational mobility have been attributed to the existence of legal, administrative and linguistic obstacles such as the portability of grants, recognition of qualifications, and foreign language learning. European cooperation has thus focused on removing these obstacles. In the higher education sector, the still-evolving Bologna Process seeks to create a “European Higher Education Area” in order to facilitate greater mobility, employability and competitiveness. Specific areas of action include: the harmonization of institutional structures; encouraging the mobility of students, teachers and researchers; cooperation on quality assurance, developing a European dimension to higher education; and the development of comparable systems for assessment and the accumulation and transfer of academic credits.

The latter provide transparency between education and training systems and enable students to transfer between member states both for employment and continuing education. In the higher education sector, the *European Credit Transfer System* (ECTS) allows for the recognition of periods of study abroad, and by 2005 all higher education institutions are to provide new graduates with a *Diploma Supplement*, a standardized document that outlines nature, level, context, content and status of the studies that the graduate has completed. The Diploma Supplement is part of the *Europass* framework, which aims to encourage occupational mobility and lifelong learning by providing a

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common and transparent framework for diplomas, certificates and competences throughout the life course. Established in 2004 to replace the *Europass-Training* framework (1999-2004), *Europass* now consists of five documents (the EuropassCV, Europass Language Passport, and the Europass Mobility, Diploma and/or Certificate Supplements) and has a wider scope that includes candidate as well as member states (<http://europass.cedefop.eu.int>).

### **Lifelong Learning & Mobility**

The *Europass* framework developed as a result of the need to encourage not only occupational mobility, but also continuous education and re-training, or “lifelong learning”. Lifelong learning is a key aim of the EU’s Lisbon Strategy, as skill development and re-training are seen as essential features of competitiveness and employment in the knowledge-based economy, as well as for social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development. However, lifelong learning encompasses not only formal, accredited training, but also informal learning opportunities and indeed “[a]ll learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective”.

In 2001, after a Europe-wide consultation process, the Commission set out a series of priorities and goals for lifelong learning, which were in turn approved by the European Council in June 2002. These priorities include: the creation of a learning culture; opening access to learning opportunities; improving basic skill levels among early school leavers, and adult learners with literacy difficulties; recognizing and valuing formal and informal learning; and providing information and guidance about learning opportunities.

To achieve these objectives, the Commission has also proposed a wide range of targets and policy proposals. Of particular interest in this context are several recent web-based initiatives to overcome the “information” gap that can inhibit educational and occupational mobility. The *Ploteus* web-portal provides information about learning opportunities, exchanges, grants and moving around Europe (<http://europa.eu.int/ploteus>). The *Eures* portal provides a similar service for employment opportunities, and compiles vacancies in the European Commission and listed in the public employment systems of member states, the EEA and Switzerland (<http://europa.eu.int/eures>). Research opportunities are listed in a separate web database, namely the *Researcher Mobility Portal* (<http://europa.eu.int/eracareers>).

More recently, additional targets have been proposed in the European Commission’s *Integrated Action Programme for Lifelong Learning*, which is to run from 2007-2013 (See [http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/education\\_culture/newprog](http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/education_culture/newprog) ). With a proposed budget of €3.62 billion (a substantial increase on previous allocations), this program would incorporate existing mobility projects such as *Erasmus* (higher education) and *Grundtvig* (adult education) and proposes ambitious goals for each sector:

- *Comenius*: To involve at least 5% of EU school pupils in joint educational activities.

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- *Erasmus*: To provide EU study abroad opportunities for a total of 3 million university students by 2011.
- *Leonardo da Vinci*: To increase training placements in enterprises and training centers in another EU country to 150,000 in 2013.
- *Grundtvig*: To help 25,000 adult education students benefit from studying abroad in 2013.

These sectoral targets are supplemented with cross-sectoral goals such as policy-cooperation, dissemination of best practices, and the development of ICT facilities for lifelong learning. The Council of Ministers and the European Parliament are to consider these proposals before the end of 2005.

### **Mobility Beyond Europe's Borders**

European mobility policies do not merely focus on mobility of Europeans between member states. Indeed, a key aim of the Lisbon Strategy is make the EU an international reference point for learning. Among other reasons, the Commission has noted that by highlighting Europe as a center for excellence in learning, Europe can compete in the emerging internationalized education market and attract more third country (non-European) students to its institutions. Attracting third country students and workers is particularly important as they represent a significant potential source of skilled labor. Furthermore, enabling Europeans to study in third countries contributes to the EU's aim of creating a highly skilled and mobile workforce.

Yet, although the EU is a net beneficiary of students and researchers from other world regions, it has typically lagged behind the US in terms of attracting third country students. For instance, recent statistics indicated that Asiatic and Latin American students prefer to study in the US, and twice as many Europeans study in the US as North Americans study in Europe. However, this situation has been reversed in the past year as applications from foreign students to US institutions dropped significantly because of the new and more stringent US visa regulations. As a result, applications from Chinese students to US institutions have dropped by 45% in the past year, and from Indian students by 30%. By contrast, British institutions have recorded annual growth in the region of 50% in applications from Chinese students since the late 1990s. Nonetheless, these patterns are recent and not replicated across EU member states, and thus the EU continues to be concerned about the disparity between the number of third country students in US and European institutions.

Thus several initiatives have recently been developed in order to internationalize and increase the competitiveness of European education systems. The *Erasmus Mundus* program, for instance, will run from 2004 – 2008 and aims to facilitate cooperation and mobility in the field of higher education. More specifically, it aims to provide funding for non-EU graduate students to study in Erasmus Mundus Masters Courses and for European students to study in third-country institutions; for partnerships between European and international institutions of higher education; and for activities that

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promote the profile, visibility and accessibility of European higher education. In addition, the *Tempus* program focuses on higher education cooperation between the EU and Central and Eastern European States.

Finally, the EU has also signed bilateral cooperation agreements with the US, Canada, Japan, and Australia. The EU-US agreement for 2001-2005 focuses on funding the development of transatlantic consortia of higher education and vocational institutions. In 2004, the EU and US allocated €265,000 and US\$315,000 respectively to these programs. However the 2005 call for proposals has been suspended due to budgetary difficulties in the US, and details as to whether the current agreement will be renewed beyond 2005 are not publicly available at time of writing.

### **Progress & Prospects for the Future**

Given that many of these programs and policies are recent innovations, it is, as yet, difficult to assess their success or efficacy. However the European Commission is currently undertaking a mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy to present to the Spring Summit of the European Council in March 2005, and mobility targets and policies will be assessed as part of this. Similarly, a review of the Bologna Process objectives is underway and will be presented at the Ministerial Conference in Bergen in May 2005.

In the interim, the Commission issued a warning in 2003 that urgent reforms were required if the Lisbon Strategy education and training targets were to be met by 2010, as “at the current rate, the Union will be unable to attain its objectives in education and training”. Likewise, the 2004 progress report on mobility policies in education and training concluded that while member states, stakeholders and the Commission have made significant efforts, and progress has been in many areas:

...overall the situation has not improved enough: comprehensive strategies to facilitate and actively promote mobility are the exception rather than the norm, and results in many fields, including the removal of administrative and legal obstacles, fall short of what is actually needed.

Furthermore, some observers have already noted that while progress is also being made in the Bologna Process, the original agenda is in danger of being diluted as the objectives are widened and placed under the influence of protectionist and anti-globalist lobby groups.

Nonetheless, in light of the traditional diversity and “national” focus of education and training systems, the extent of European cooperation in this policy field should in itself be considered a significant achievement. Moreover, the financial and political support at both European and national levels is such that, by 2010, many of the existing legal and administrative obstacles to labor and educational mobility will be a thing of the past, although linguistic and cultural barriers may prove more durable.