



**INTERVIEW WITH THEMIS CHRISTOPHIDOU, DIRECTOR GENERAL,
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[1] Dear Ms Christophidou, you have only recently started at the Directorate General for Education, Culture, Youth and Sports; but you have extensive experience in the European Commission. What has triggered your interest in this policy field? Did the first days and weeks in office create any surprises?

I am very pleased to work in an area that is of such importance to society. Education and culture are really the key building blocks that determine what the future of our society will look like. And sport and youth policies are also key areas where the EU can bring added value to the efforts of Member States.

The work we are doing in my department can help the European Union overcome the myriad of interacting, complex and urgent challenges: inclusion and active citizenship, relevant skills for the world of work, and cultural diversity and respect for our common heritage, not to mention the 4th industrial revolution dramatically changing the world of work and education.

Of course, these cannot be single-handedly solved by my colleagues alone, however hard working and committed they are. Nor is this the Commission's intention. Throughout all of our programmes and policies we work hand in hand with key actors: other EU institutions, Member States, regional and local authorities and a number of stakeholders from the policy fields we cover.

In short, the common thread running throughout all of our work is an attempt to create an economically resilient and socially cohesive European community where we are truly united in diversity.

As for surprises, well, there weren't any immediate ones. Yet, I think it's fair to say I arrived when it was all hands on deck. With the preparation of the proposals for the EU's budget for 2021-2027, and a big policy package both released in May, it was an incredibly busy and rewarding time. I was impressed by the professionalism, steely determination and teamwork of my colleagues. And I look forward to our continued work for the benefit of our European Union.

[2] Education does not lie within the competence of the European Union. Nevertheless, the EU has made an important contribution to European higher education policy-making in recent years. Joint programmes, mobility across borders and further internationalization of institutions require a European response. How do you intend to deal with this challenge?

The good news is that never before have education and training been so high on the political agenda. At the November 2017 Gothenburg summit, EU leaders discussed the vision set out by the Commission of working towards the creation of a European Education Area by 2025, in which learning mobility and educational opportunities empower young people to reach their full potential and strengthen a European identity. In December 2017, the European Council called on Member States, the Council and the Commission to take work forward a number of these proposed key initiatives. These included the future Erasmus programme to boost mobility across borders, 'European universities' to further international cooperation between European higher education institutions, and a European student card that will allow students to make the best of their learning period abroad.

I am proud that five months later, we have already made fast progress on the delivery of these initiatives. The College adopted the proposal for a legal base for the new Erasmus programme 2021-2027. A Council Recommendation has been proposed for the automatic mutual recognition of diplomas and learning periods abroad, which is essential to remove the last barriers to mobility of students. And first pilots to test the new concept of 'European Universities' will be launched this autumn.

All these recent initiatives have been triggered by our funding programme. In just three decades, Erasmus+ and its predecessor programmes have changed the education landscape in Europe and opened up opportunities for nine million people. The 30th anniversary of the programme – celebrated last year throughout Europe and beyond – gave us a unique opportunity to reflect on what has been achieved and the drive to look forward and do more and better, putting education at the top of citizens' mind and at the forefront of the political agenda.

[3] 2018 will be an eventful year. The European Commission has proposed a doubling of the Erasmus budget for the next multiannual financial framework 2021-2027. What do you want to achieve with this increase in funding, specifically in the higher education sector? Will this increase allow for a doubling of the number of Erasmus students as of 2021?

It is a very good sign to see Erasmus as a political priority of the European Union.

In May 2018, the European Commission has indeed proposed to double the Erasmus budget to €30 billion for the period 2021-2027. This will provide learning and mobility opportunities to 12 million people, in comparison to 4 million people in the current programme. The Erasmus programme will continue to support schools, vocational education and training, higher education and adult learning - youth and sport. As President Juncker put it himself, 'Every euro that we invest in Erasmus+ is an investment in the future – in the future of a young person and of our European idea.'

A larger budget, combined with more opportunities for blended mobility, will contribute to triple the number of Erasmus participants taking part in this future programme.

One of our key objectives is to make Erasmus more inclusive and accessible to students from a diverse range of backgrounds, thereby better reflecting the diversity of students in our higher education institutions. This includes mature students as well.

In addition, a new Erasmus programme with a larger budget also means new, exciting possibilities for stepping up mobility, strengthening cooperation and boosting innovation including through:

- the introduction of targeted mobility in forward looking fields to build up skills in strategic sectors and encourage Europe's competitive edge in these areas: climate change, renewable energy, environmental engineering, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, design and creative industries;
- providing support to new and ambitious cooperation models through the dedicated flag-ship initiative of 'European Universities', on top of supporting more inclusive strategic partnerships;
- intensified international mobility and cooperation with third countries - in particular enlargement, neighbourhood, industrialised and emerging countries - to support more opportunities for young European higher education and vocational students to have an international experience beyond Europe. Cooperation with third countries will be boosted to help capacity building, social commitment and entrepreneurial spirit, benefiting local communities.

The launch of a European student card will support institutions to send and receive more exchange students. Its aim is to reduce burden and costs for students and education institutions by streamlining administrative processes before, during and after a mobility period, while at the same time being a visible symbol of a European student identity. Based on existing EU-funded pilot projects which will be scaled up in 2019, as well as on further analysis and consultations with stakeholders, the Commission aims to start a progressive roll-out of the European Student Card by 2021.

[4] Mobility of individuals has been at the core of Erasmus+ and its predecessor programmes. However, only a small percentage of young people benefit from Erasmus+ mobility support today. How do you intend to widen access, diversify the target groups (underprivileged groups) and reach more (and new) young people?

The launch of the Erasmus+ programme in 2014 marked a more simplified, streamlined and flexible programme and put the issue of inclusion at the forefront. Its very own legal basis underlines that '(...) the Commission and the Member States shall ensure that particular efforts are made to promote social inclusion and the participation of people with special needs or with fewer opportunities.'

In line with this, Erasmus+ offers additional financial support disadvantaged students in the form of monthly top-up grants. It also encourages Member States to add further top-ups to those in need of more financial support. To date, Erasmus+ has supported more than 238,000 participants from disadvantaged backgrounds across all the sectors of the programme (11.5% of the total number of participants, more than double the predecessor programmes).

Despite these efforts, access to the programme still needs to be widened and improvements moving beyond top-up grants need to be made. To tackle this, an improved communication strategy will be embedded within the next programme to reach out to more people with fewer opportunities and more diverse learners. There will be more flexible mobility formats, such as short-term and group activities, blended and virtual mobility, making full use of digital innovations. We also need to look at the grant levels.

We will also offer 'peer-mentoring' before mobility, including linguistic support, to proactively encourage disadvantaged students to go abroad. The Erasmus+ Mobile App – downloaded nearly 40,000 times since its launch last year and soon to be expanded – is an example of a great tool where students can easily exchange practical tips, as well as share experiences and other helpful advice.

Finally, the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education will be further improved in the next programme to reflect the importance of the participation of under-represented learners in learning mobility. Inclusion and diversity should become part of the priorities of the Charter.

[5] A recent study by DAAD shows that German higher education institutions (HEIs) recognize on average 75% of academic study abroad achievements. Despite this overall positive result (we can see an increase over last years), academic recognition is still not automatic. Is 100% recognition a realistic objective? What does the Commission intend to do to support further progress in this matter?

Rates of full academic recognition have continued to improve under Erasmus+, with the current level throughout the 33 Erasmus+ programme countries now reaching over 85% compared to 76% under the Lifelong Learning Programme in 2014.

100% academic recognition must remain our ambition in order for the future Erasmus to continue improving in terms of both quality implementation and attractiveness. On 22 May 2018, the Commission has given a clear sign in this direction by proposing a Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of study periods abroad.

To reach full academic recognition, it is important that we underline the importance of learning agreements being prepared well in advance of the mobility period by both the sending and receiving institutions. This also applies to the students who can now sign their agreement through the Erasmus+ Mobile app. These are the key elements in securing full recognition of students' learning outcomes from the first to the last day of the mobility cycle.

With this target in mind, the Commission supports a range of projects supporting the academic recognition process in Erasmus+. The Erasmus Grade Conversion System (EGRACONS) equips institutions with the tools to convert the results from a study abroad period to the system used by the sending university. The Erasmus Without Paper network is developing digital tools which will facilitate smooth, digital and automatic recognition of learning outcomes from studying abroad.

Building 'mobility windows' into course design is proving to be an effective practice facilitating full recognition of learning abroad. The objective of European Universities is to mainstream and expand this good practice.

The Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation will give a further political impetus to this process. It also suggests a step-by-step process to support Member States in ensuring that by 2025, higher education or upper secondary qualifications gained in one Member State – and also outcomes of study periods abroad – are automatically recognised in other Member States for the purpose of further studies. That is our firm ambition.

[6] We have followed with interest the proposal of French president Macron, now taken-up by the European Commission, to create some 20 European Universities. Will this new initiative radically change the European Higher Education Area?

Europe has a long and proud tradition of higher education institutions cooperating across borders. European Universities will bring this cooperation to the next level. Higher education institutions, sharing the same vision and values, will develop joint long-term institutional strategies for top-quality education, research and innovation. They will drive the development of highly integrated and open study programmes where embedded mobility at Bachelor, Master and Doctoral levels is a standard feature allowing any student, academic or researcher to study, work or undertake research in different languages whilst moving freely across borders and disciplines.

By bringing together a new generation of Europeans who are able to cooperate and work within different European and global cultures, in different languages, and across borders, sectors and academic disciplines, European Universities will promote common European values and a strengthened European identity.

The alliances of European Universities will be geographically balanced, socially inclusive and sustainable. European Universities will act as models of good practice for other higher education institutions and progressively increase the international competitiveness and attractiveness of European higher education.

To foster the emergence of at least twenty alliances by 2024, the Commission is already working closely with Member States and stakeholders to develop the full concept. Pilots are expected to start in 2019 and 2020 under the Erasmus+ programme, and a full rollout is proposed as of 2021.

And here I would really like to underline that the European Commission is co-creating a concept hand-in-hand with the Member States and stakeholders. We want to make sure that the concept responds to the needs of European higher education institutions and that its ownership is equally felt and perceived by national authorities, higher education institutions, students and teaching staff. It seems that we are on the right track as so far at least 4 European university alliances composed of around 20 higher education institutions across Europe have publicly expressed their interest in applying through the first pilot call –before the call has even been launched!

[8] Last but not least – the fundamental values of higher education – autonomy of institutions and free thinking, independent of political interference – are at stake in many countries today. Does the European Commission have any measures at hand to react to these developments?

I am convinced that these values are not only fundamental to higher education, but that they underpin our shared European project. Free thinking, autonomy and solidarity must be defended, cherished and nurtured.

There are no quick fixes to any of the societal challenges that we face today. To tackle them successfully, we need resilient citizens who can adapt to changing circumstances, work in diverse teams, and develop creative solutions to complex problems, and share values and goals. Education and culture play a major role in this and the results of European initiatives are already on the table.

The recent Erasmus+ mid-term evaluation has shown that the programme stands today among the three most positive results of European integration: along peace, the euro and the internal market. In just three decades, Erasmus+ and its predecessors have given the continent a whole generation of Europeans who are not only better prepared to take on new challenges, but who are also more tolerant, versatile and confident.

The Paris communiqué adopted at the Ministerial Conference of the Bologna Process last May underlined the key aspects of the European Higher Education Area: academic freedom, integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education. Ministers strongly committed to promoting and protecting them through intensified political dialogue and cooperation.