EUF EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY FOUNDATION
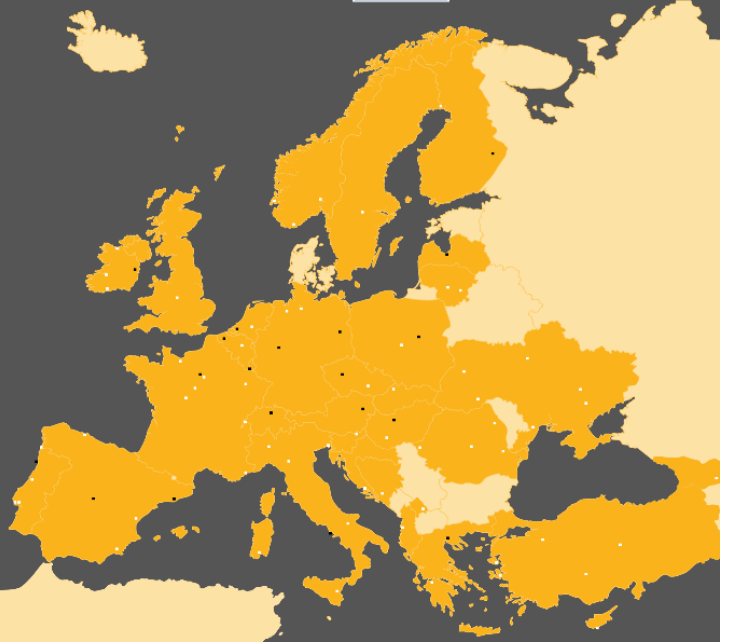
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Celebrating 20 years of achievements

Changing universities. Changing Europe.

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Dear colleagues and friends, I feel very honored and also humble because, honestly, I have only contributed a small fraction to the enormous amount of work done in the course of those 20 years of existence of the European University Foundation. It feels completely undeserved that I am now in the spotlight. So, I would like to express my sincerest thanks to everyone who made this event and this anniversary possible. First and foremost, we thank the wonderful organizing team from Erasmus University Rotterdam, our esteemed host. Thanks also to the present and past members of the steering committee, the present and past members of the Council of Rectors, and the present and past general secretaries of EUF.

Also, I would like to extend my gratitude to all of the project managers, coordinators, and other IRO officers at the universities, student ambassadors, project members, students giving feedback after returning from their stays abroad, professors willing to assist them during their sojourns, and their classmates who helped them to overcome the difficulties of living in a different country and coping with all the problems this involved.

European universities have always had an international mission and character. The *peregrinatio academica* has been an integral part of university life since the very first centuries of their existence. It can be traced back as far as the privilege granted by Emperor Frederick Barbarossa in 1155, which offered the emperor's special protection to the wandering students. This is something worth considering nowadays.

In medieval and early modern times, as well as in the 19th and early 20th century, students crisscrossed Europe – on foot, on horseback, in oxcarts, and later in trains and cars – in search of famous professors; and professors, too, moved easily from one university to another. All this not only instigated a transformational learning process for individual students, broadening their personal and intellectual horizons, but also collectively formed an informal yet extremely efficient evaluation system that encouraged all involved, institutions and individuals, to improve themselves constantly.

Only the two World Wars and the subsequent Cold War closed the borders, not just for academic peregrination, of course. Especially for the inhabitants of the countries of the former Soviet bloc, the possibility to travel and to study abroad had been one of the most important achievements of the transformations brought about in 1989, as many of us – students or young academics at that time – can testify.

Europe, in a quickly changing world, is facing major challenges, and the higher education sector has an essential role to play. No wonder the EU has placed universities and its knowledge society at the heart of its mission. And rightly so, as the universities embody all the values the EU member states have promised to stand by: democracy, human dignity, freedom, equality, rule of law, and human rights, not to mention the power of learning, critical thinking, and culture. Knowledge institutions are the column on which the European structure rests, and the student mobility ensures that these knowledge institutions remain vibrant, and interlaced by firm ties that go across political, linguistic, and cultural borders.

Ensuring a positive student experience during a study stay abroad is the responsibility of all involved: senior administrators at the respective universities, academic and non-academic staff, fellow students, and even local communities. Internationalization definitely is not just about recruiting students from other countries. It reaches into the nature, perspective, and culture of all of the functions of a university, into every facet of its operation, from teaching and education to research and scholarship, to enterprise and innovation, and to the culture and ethos of the institution. Of course, given the diversity of student backgrounds, abilities, and ambitions, and the character of the respective universities, the experiences of those returning from study stays are likely to differ significantly. But it can be stated that for almost any student, the stay abroad has an enormous impact, combining the knowledge transfer during classes with the informal immersion into local culture. I don't want to preach to the converted, and disprove before this audience the urban legends about lazy Erasmus students spending their time on the beaches, as you know as well as I do how important this informal communication is.

These were the foundational ideas behind the Erasmus programme and the driving force behind the educational initiative Campus Europae. Originating in the late 1990s and championed by then-Chancellor of Germany Helmut Kohl, Campus Europae arose to become a laboratory for the efforts to strengthen and accelerate the development of the European Higher Education Area. Its mission was to capitalize on existing

achievements, and inspire collaboration. Emphasizing cultural understanding, multilingualism, and pioneering mobility solutions, the consortium universities sought to establish concrete examples of cooperation.

Their goal was to help students develop linguistic and intercultural competencies, alongside a proactive, inclusive mentality, encouraging them to embrace both cultural similarities and differences. All this is done with the conviction that such learning outcomes do not only benefit the individual students but also contribute to creating a more interconnected society, that academic mobility positively contributes to active European citizenship of the new generations. Also, I want to mention another important cornerstone of this initiative: the insistence that the individual universities maintain their particular identities, yet by collaborating with each other, they would make existing diversities and specific characteristics of each of the institutions fruitful.

Some years later, Jean Claude Juncker offered the patronage of the Luxembourg Government to this project, making possible the launch of the European University Foundation as we know it today. That is a network whose principal aims include building capacity and expertise among administrative and academic staff members, raising awareness of EU policy goals and actions, positively influencing these goals and actions, and facilitating policy dialogues among all the stakeholders in the field. The entire initiative substantiated the concept of closely integrating European university systems, a process initiated in 1999 by European education ministers within the framework of the Bologna process. It is very important to note that the establishment of EUF took place not just in close communication with the representatives of the universities, but also through continued consultations with the students. This approach took into account not only their visions for their studies but also their visions for the Europe they wanted to be a part of.

Looking back at the original idea of Campus Europae concept, after almost 30 years, what strikes me most is the ambitiousness of its founders. They advocated for all students in European universities to be mobile, with the goal that every single one of them could go abroad for two full years, to two different countries, and study in two different languages – this would mean that in any given year up to 40% of our student population would be abroad. Additionally, they aimed to pursue their original studies efficiently at their home university.

These plans reflected the realization of the fact that the greatest strength of Europe's unity lies in its diversity; and that this diversity must be maintained, but at the same time brought into a productive interplay. Diversity is a strength when it allows for choice, creativity, and synergy. In fact, this principle also underlies the recent idea of "European universities" and forms the basis for the existence of European university alliances today. I want to quote from Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech of 2017: "Instead of deploring our many languages, our diverse educational traditions, our so different institutional structures, we should make them an asset. Instead of lamenting the divisions between our countries, let's step up exchanges." President Macron's words confirm yet again the

visionary nature of the efforts that brought the EUF together, and the fact that its original aims remain meaningful.

What is even more important is that the boldness of our founders has continued to inspire us always to aim high, to go beyond what others may think is possible or reasonable. EUF has the results to prove this belief in ourselves, and our visions bring concrete results, especially considering just how far we have pushed EU policies over the last 10 years. Among those achievements, I would like to mention at least some. It is now possible for students to go abroad more than once. By the way, this was also integral to the original Campus Europae concept, but it was not allowed by the funding rules of the Erasmus programme until the year 2014. Until then, students could only get one Erasmus grant. EUF also pioneered the introduction of social top-ups, which are additional scholarships on top of the normal Erasmus+ scholarship. These changes made it possible for socially disadvantaged students also to travel abroad. Again, the social top-up scholarships were put into practice in 2014, and after having a very positive impact, their usage was considerably expanded in 2021.

Last but not least, in the past 10 years (to be more precise, discussions began in 2012, and projects in 2015), a great amount of effort by EUF universities was invested into the dematerialization of the burdensome administration that EU-funded student mobility entails. The result is what has become known as Erasmus Without Paper, a digital ecosystem for higher education institutions to connect their Erasmus+ mobility management systems, enabling them to handle their mobility students online. Thanks to EWP, in just four years, nearly all of the 3000 higher education institutions across Europe that organize student mobility are now electronically connected to each other and able to exchange data, to communicate information about their students' mobility both swiftly and securely. This is by far the most advanced data ecosystem for academic mobility in the world. And while the digital transformation journey is never an easy one, we have made some great strides. The task is not yet complete, but the most challenging steps are already behind us rather than ahead.

In the past four years, as we all know, enormous strain has been placed on the entire European population, bringing suffering and pain to many. The COVID pandemic disrupted the entire system of academic exchanges, and despite provoking the creation of distance learning tools, there is no doubt its repercussions (including the psycho-emotional consequences) will take a long to amend. Russia's invasion of Ukraine resulted in thousands of deaths, displacements, enormous material losses, and also deprived millions of young people of their right to education. The member universities of the EUF worked closely together to provide assistance and built reference tools for those seeking safety and wanting to continue their studies. Additionally, EUF extended institutional support to Ukrainian universities by inviting altogether six of them to become involved in the network, fostering collaboration and addressing present and future challenges. The war crisis of 2022 also highlighted the shortcomings of a coordinated European response to support displaced Higher Education students. This led to the launch of important

policy initiatives, such as the proposal – promoted by the European Students' Union – to create a European scholarship scheme for students at risk.

So far, I have been talking about past work and past achievements. While these are important, even more important are the challenges the European University Foundation, the European Higher Education Area, and the whole of Europe are facing at present. The most significant among them is the climate change, or more accurately, climate collapse we currently face. The High Education Institutions have a key role to play in addressing the environmental issues. And it is essential to acknowledge that a fair amount of a university's ecological footprint is intricately linked to actions related to academic mobility. Thus, we have a responsibility to reconcile our effort for constant promotion of student mobilities with an equally intense ethos of sustainability, and to eventually ensure this is true of all of our internationalization activities. This approach would also strengthen the position of students as active actors in promoting sustainability. And I am happy to say students already are greatly attuned to environmental issues.

The problem of environmental impact is one of the three main priorities adopted within the new multiannual financial framework of the Erasmus+ programme, and the EUF responded accordingly. The projects Erasmus Goes Green, Green Erasmus, and Sustainable Erasmus Travel, initiated by EUF, aim to empower students, higher education institutions, and decision-makers to push for improvements in environmental sustainability. All three initiatives promote sustainability in mobility, international cooperation, and strategic planning. We aspire to remain at the forefront of researching the behavior of mobile students relative to environmental questions and putting forward policies to address the most pressing issues. To provide a concrete example, I want to return again to the Erasmus Without Paper. Through this initiative, we have been leading by example the efforts to dematerialize the administration of academic mobilities in Europe. While seemingly a small step, it could save as many as 20 million printed pages per year.

And there are other important initiatives. The Erasmus Goes Green policy recommendations put forward various measures we deem would have a strong impact on improving the environmental sustainability of the Erasmus+ programme and decreasing its carbon footprint. The key action that we believe would have a positive impact is to offer every student one ticket for a sustainable mode of transport (e.g. train), for both the outward and return journey. This would mark a historical shift of the Erasmus+ programme towards sustainability.

Another priority and challenge for the future is that of inclusiveness and diversity in academic mobilities. This is an extremely important point. When praising the medieval academic peregrination, I failed to include a crucial fact. During those past centuries, student mobility has played a fundamental role in the socialization of intellectual, artistic, and political elites of Europe. Travel for study was a privilege reserved for a fraction of the student population, just as the university study itself was a privilege as well. Nowadays, higher education is much more accessible, but mobility still isn't. There are

too many students who simply cannot afford to travel, especially as living and accommodation costs are rising rapidly across Europe. Many students have to work just to keep themselves within the university system, and they simply cannot bear the additional costs of traveling abroad.

Erasmus+ programme, being one of the EU's flagship initiatives for more than three decades, has undoubtedly had a tremendous impact on the whole concept of student mobilities. Thanks to this program, participation in the various mobility schemes has gradually increased and diversified. Since 1987, the Erasmus+ scheme has allowed the mobility of 12 million participants. While this number is significant, it is still just a fraction of the overall student population in Europe, and we need to ensure much more equitable participation in academic exchanges. The overall growth of the mobility rates is noticeably inconsistent among countries, compounded by a national lack of balance between incoming and outgoing students.

Ensuring equal access to education and mobility, removing not just bureaucratic obstacles, but especially economic barriers, as well as promoting diversity and social fairness in higher education are vitally important goals for the EUF. These will remain the main strategic priorities of the network in the years to come. To make mobility more inclusive, the EUF and its member universities have already engaged in several activities. The first set of projects has focused on improving financial support for students, as lack of funding has often been described as the most important obstacle to participation in mobility. Also, we need to explore the potential of intergenerational exchange as a means of community building in the higher education framework. So, we have a lot of work ahead of us to make sure the meaningful experience of a full year abroad, or even a semester, does not become the exclusive privilege of only a few students.

Yet we also need to reconcile such a proposal for an extensive increase in mobilities with the efforts to maintain their high quality. At the beginning of my presentation, I stated the obvious – namely, that there are great differences in the students' needs and expectations regarding their stays abroad. In other words, defining 'quality' in this (as well as other) fields of university education might seem impossible. Still, there are ways to define – and eventually measure – the quality of mobility, precisely in relation to the students' needs and the whole structure of university study. This is why we need to consistently and continuously include students' feedback into the projects, and take into account the diversity of the European High Education Area. EUF has done considerable work in this field over the past years, and continues to push the efforts for quality further. This is why I am happy about a new project starting this year, led by our colleagues at Saclay and Humboldt, which aims to define a comparable methodology for us to precisely understand how the population of mobile students differs from the overall student population in each of our own universities. This should give us the tools to close this gap in the years to come.

Universities are, of course, centers of research, constantly pushing forward in all areas of science. But they are more than that. They are also communities - communities of

teachers and students who participate equally in the pursuit of knowledge, in the intellectual and cultural dialogue. While we rightly expect universities to excel in scientific development, addressing societal needs in fields like medicine and natural and technical sciences, they also must respond to other social needs. The younger generations must learn to live together in diverse and heterogeneous, differentiated, and dynamic societies, fostering mutual respect.

Today, we are celebrating our 20 years of hard work and achievements in the field of student academic mobilities at the university that bears the name of the great Humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus. So, let me conclude my speech by quoting the man who himself could give testimony of the benefits of *peregrinatio academica*. The man who lived in hard times and yet did not lose hope for the betterment of human nature. For Erasmus, the highest goal for mankind was the preservation of peace. He was convinced that „where mutual concord prevails, no one lacks for anything; where discord prevails, even those who have good things cannot enjoy them." I would add that discord is often born from the ignorance of the other's ways, customs, and opinions. Only through a continued process of getting to know each other, respecting each other, and learning from each other, do we acquire not just knowledge but wisdom. Only then we can eradicate stereotypes, biases, and misconceptions, enabling us to build a meaningful future for us all.