

INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FOR INCLUSION

BEYOND BARRIERS

**A TRULY INCLUSIVE
NEW ERASMUS+
FOR HIGHLY VULNERABLE
YOUNG PEOPLE**

–POSITION PAPER–



INTRODUCTION

This Position Paper was produced by the International Network for Inclusion, coordinated by **Associazione Joint** – a network of over 30 organisations working **directly with young people facing barriers** and with solid experience in **youth exchanges and mobility management**. The members are united by a strong commitment and years of experience in promoting the inclusion of vulnerable young people, and by a shared determination to make mobility projects more inclusive through the removal of systemic barriers.

This document represents the culmination of a participatory work initiated in 2022 and aims to create systemic conditions within the Erasmus+ programme to **make youth mobility activities more accessible, inclusive, and safe for Highly Vulnerable Young People (HVYP)**.

By *Highly Vulnerable Young People*—as defined by our International Network for Inclusion in 2022—we refer to *those living in vulnerable situations and facing multiple, overlapping risk factors for exclusion, at least one of which is a long-term or permanent condition*. Examples may include:

- a young person living in shelters or alternative care,
- LGBTQI+ youth facing homophobia in their communities,
- a young person with mental health challenges affecting their social and economic inclusion,
- a young person from a conflict or post-conflict area struggling with trauma and economical challenges.

A mobility experience can have a **deeply positive impact** on these young people's personal growth and life trajectories. It allows them to step outside their usual environment, meet peers from diverse backgrounds, gain new skills, and become more active members of their communities.

However, their participation in mobility activities needs to be **effective, inclusive, and safe**. To achieve this, **structural improvements** are required both **within the Erasmus+ programme** and in the **work of the participating organisations**. These improvements can only happen through **close cooperation** among organisations, local actors, stakeholders, and policymakers at all levels — including **EACEA** and the **Erasmus+ Youth National Agencies**.

This paper proposes 3 main areas for intervention, which are detailed in the following sections.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND OF THE POSITION PAPER (2022–2025)

As mentioned earlier, this document is the result of a participatory process that, since 2022, has involved over 100 European organisations active in the field of youth mobility within the Erasmus+ programme.

The process, **led by the International Network for Inclusion coordinated by Associazione Joint**, was driven by a shared goal: **to make mobility projects more inclusive and accessible** for young people who are often excluded from such opportunities.

This collective effort led to the creation of **shared 8 Quality Standards for inclusive youth exchanges**, a **safeguarding policy**, and **monitoring tools** to assess inclusion, safety, and learning outcomes. It also fostered **local inclusion networks** in 7 countries to connect with public authorities and social actors, and a **common framework on Highly Vulnerable Young People (HVYP)** used across the Network and partner consortia as an **internal reference for inclusion work**. Finally, since 2024, the Network has been working on the model of **Young Ambassadors**, i.e. former participants in youth exchanges trained to support local promotion of European opportunities among their peers, with a focus on the outreach of underrepresented communities.

All these outputs — and in particular the Quality Standards and the Young Ambassadors model — **could serve as reference models to be further promoted and adapted within the Erasmus+ framework**. They, indeed, helps address some of the challenges and needs detected and addressed in this Position Paper

This process has built on:

- 2 needs analysis on inclusion barriers and enablers, with **149 survey respondents** and **30 in-depth interviews**;
- 3 annual network meetings, involving more than 80 participants and 50 organisations;
- **over 30 youth exchanges** and **10 mobilities of youth workers** focused on inclusion and safeguarding;
- the **Network's Inclusion Committee**, a **permanent body of 6 experts** coordinating the development of tools, policies, and strategic recommendations.

IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

Ensuring the effective and genuinely inclusive participation of Highly Vulnerable Young People (HVYP) requires addressing a set of challenges that are not typically encountered when working with other youth groups.

These barriers highlight the need for specific structural interventions aimed at reducing or removing obstacles to participation.

The identified needs fall into 2 main categories: **Accessibility** and **Support**.

As outlined in the previous section, **our network has already taken important steps to address these challenges**, laying the groundwork for more inclusive and effective participation of Highly Vulnerable Young People. **Building on this progress**, we believe that a coordinated, multi-level approach—extending beyond the International Network for Inclusion and involving local, national, and European stakeholders—is essential to develop **comprehensive and sustainable solutions**.

ACCESSIBILITY

Highly Vulnerable Young People often face systemic barriers that prevent them from accessing information about youth mobility opportunities. The main challenges include:

- **Limited outreach and cooperation at the local level:**

There is often insufficient communication and collaboration between organisations implementing mobility projects and those working directly with vulnerable youth in local contexts.

As a result, information about opportunities rarely reaches potential participants, and effective mechanisms for identifying, selecting, and supporting HVYP are lacking. This structural gap reduces the inclusiveness of mobility programmes and limits their long-term impact.

- **Projects not aligned with participants' real needs:**

Many mobility projects are not designed around the specific realities and aspirations of HVYP.

Activities are often disconnected from broader educational, social, or employability pathways at the local level.

To ensure genuine inclusion, mobility projects should be **embedded in medium- or long-term developmental processes** that strengthen the participants' personal, educational, and social trajectories.

SUPPORT

Involving Highly Vulnerable Young People demands a well-structured and sustainable support system before, during, and after mobility activities. The main needs identified include:

- **Pre-departure and follow-up support:**

Communication with guardians or caregivers, assistance with travel logistics and documentation, and psychological support before and after the project are all essential.

In some cases, youth workers need to visit participants in person to ensure safety and readiness. These tasks are time-consuming and complex but often remain unacknowledged or unpaid within current project structures.

- **Quality and safety standards:**

Clear safeguarding procedures and quality protocols must be implemented during mobility to ensure that participation is both safe and meaningful for HVYP.

- **Qualified and stable group leaders:**

Those working directly with HVYP must have the skills to identify and manage vulnerability and to create inclusive, secure group dynamics.

However, many organisations rely on volunteers or short-term staff without the necessary training. This situation contributes to **high turnover rates**, weakening organisational capacity, disrupting continuity, and reducing institutional memory. In the long term, this instability undermines the quality, safety, and sustainability of mobility projects.

- **Emotional and professional sustainability:**

Supporting HVYP can be emotionally demanding. Youth workers often operate in high-stress contexts without proper supervision, debriefing opportunities, or mental health support.

This lack of structured support leads to fatigue and burnout, which in turn increases staff turnover and limits the capacity of organisations to maintain consistent, high-quality inclusion practices.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Based on the identified needs and the work carried out since 2022, the International Network for Inclusion led by Associazione Joint calls for the improvement of the **Erasmus+ Youth** programme through **3 key measures**:

1. **OFFICIAL RECOGNITION OF A DISTINCT CATEGORY FOR “HIGHLY VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE”**

The Erasmus+ Programme Guidelines should formally distinguish between *young people with fewer opportunities* and *highly vulnerable young people (HVYP)*.

This differentiation should focus primarily on the **quality standards** required and the **support measures** expected when implementing projects that involve HVYP.

- a. **An important and needed division between “Fewer Opportunities” and “Highly Vulnerable Young People”**

The category of “Highly vulnerable young people” is not intended to replace the category of young people facing “Fewer opportunities”, as currently described in the Erasmus+ Guidelines. Rather, it aims to expand it by considering the intersectional nature of barriers and the varying degrees of difficulty they may represent. Therefore, a clear distinction must be made within the Erasmus+ Programme.

The “Fewer opportunities” category is not detailed enough - and is often used with great flexibility by the organisations - making it impossible to clearly take into account the various obstacles faced by certain young people.

Recognizing the “Highly Vulnerable young people” category, in the 2028-2034 Erasmus+ programme, will make it possible to take into consideration young people at high risk of long-term marginalization, by providing the tools to adequately support them and address their specific needs.

b. Establishment of Quality Standards and supporting measures for participants

Erasmus+ should establish Quality Standards for project-leading organisations involving Highly Vulnerable Young People. These standards will ensure that proper support is effectively provided to young people in all the phases of the project life-cycle and that projects are tailored to the needs of the most vulnerable young people.

Organisations must adhere to a framework set by the Programme, following the Standards in partnership development, selection processes, role definitions, risk prevention, and the design of programs suitable for youth exchanges.

2. A DEDICATED FUNDING ACTION FOR LOCAL OUTREACH AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES

The programme should establish a dedicated **funding line to support local awareness-raising and promotional activities** targeting both young people and youth organisations, particularly those that rarely participate in mobility projects. This action should **prioritise cooperation with local stakeholders working directly with highly vulnerable young people**, helping to bridge the gap between mobility opportunities and those who need them most.

a. A fund to reach new audiences

The funding action should support initiatives that **expand the reach of Erasmus+ to new and underrepresented groups of young people**, encouraging organisations to design approaches suited to their local realities and contexts.

Rather than prescribing specific cooperation models, the fund would **prioritise partnerships with organisations and stakeholders working directly with vulnerable or less engaged young people**. These collaborations could take different forms — including local networks or peer-learning initiatives — when they help to **build trust, remove barriers, and create lasting pathways to participation**.

b. Engaging young people as drivers of inclusion and outreach

The programme should place a stronger focus on the **active involvement of young people — including Highly Vulnerable Young People (HVYP) — as key actors in reaching new audiences** and promoting inclusive access to mobility opportunities. Their direct experience and local engagement can play a crucial role in **building trust and awareness among peers who are often less reached by traditional channels**.

To this end, support should be provided for **initiatives that empower young people after their mobility experiences**, enabling them to contribute to **local outreach, peer-to-peer learning, and promotional activities** that foster a sense of belonging and participation.

The **Young Ambassadors for Youth Mobility** model, developed within our Network since 2024, offers one possible example of how former participants can effectively promote mobility opportunities and European values among their peers.

3. **INCREASED INVESTMENT IN PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES**

Greater financial and training resources should be allocated to **youth workers, group leaders, and support staff** engaged in projects involving HVYP.

This investment is essential to ensure that these professionals are properly trained, fairly compensated, and equipped to provide ongoing pre-departure, on-site, and follow-up support—reducing turnover and improving project quality and safety.

a. **Promoting the professionalisation of the group leader**

Erasmus+ should ensure financial and training support for group leaders working with Highly Vulnerable Young People (HVYP), as this role cannot be taken by volunteers or not trained people. This includes: access to specialised training courses, an economic recognition of the group leader's work, and formal recognition of the group leader's central role in inclusion and safety.

b. **Recognising that making mobility projects accessible to HVYP involves additional preparation and follow-up activities that deserve financial support.**

The *Erasmus+ Programme Guide* should provide clearer and more detailed guidance on the activities and support to be ensured during the pre-departure and follow-up phases — both in general and, in particular, when involving Highly Vulnerable Young People (HVYP).

In addition, Erasmus+ should introduce a **dedicated budget item** that can be activated when projects involve HVYP, recognising the additional preparation, support, and follow-up work required to ensure their safe and meaningful participation. This item, complementing the current Inclusion Support, should cover specific costs such as staff time, interpreters, personal assistants, and other inclusion-related expenses. Moreover, **it should be available even after project approval when new needs arise.**

c. **An increased attention to the wellbeing of the involved youth workers**

Erasmus+ should include systematic wellbeing and mental health support for youth workers and group leaders working with HVYP. This includes scenario-based training activities, access to psychological counselling or supervision after projects, and practical guidance for handling difficult situations.

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