ERASMUS+ COALITION

FOR STRONG EU PROGRAMMES FOR EDUCATION, YOUTH AND SPORTS

Joint contribution of Erasmus+ Coalition on the Future of Erasmus+

This paper outlines the vision of the Erasmus+ Coalition on the future generation of the Erasmus+ programme based on its current implementation and potential areas for improvement. *The Erasmus+ Coalition*, set up in 2015 by the *Lifelong Learning Platform* and *European Youth Forum*, is an informal alliance of civil society organisations with extensive experience in working with Erasmus+ and previous generations of the programme. Both organisations coordinate dialogue between the EU institutions and civil society organisations across Europe representing all categories of programme beneficiaries. We meet regularly to discuss issues of common concern in the programme implementation and to formulate common recommendations.

As negotiations are now beginning on the Erasmus+ successor, it is a timely opportunity to update our *2016 position* with a view to providing decision makers with concrete solutions on how to improve the programme implementation for its beneficiaries and ensure that it remains the flagship programme of the EU for education, training, mobility and youth.

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1. Accessibility and social inclusion

The access and inclusion of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society should be ensured in the next generation of the programme. In the eyes of many the programme is considered elitist. The grants for individual mobilities are not adequate for people who are underprivileged and who cannot complement funds to support living costs in another country. The programme's visibility is relatively good and raises much interest among certain individuals but its accessibility remains a problem. Questions have been raised about increased outreach and impact, with the need to focus more on projects with multiple beneficiaries rather than individual ones. Recommended actions to ensure the inclusive character of the successor programme include:

- Respond to the increasing demand of students mobility in higher education while extending opportunities for school students and stakeholders (non-teaching staff, parents, teachers, volunteers), VET and adults learners.

- **Adapt the Erasmus+ financial support for mobility to the cost of destination** but also based on social economic background and family of the individual. Increase the level of individual grants depending on the living costs in cities/regions where the mobility take place, in particular taking into consideration accomodation costs which are very often a barrier for mobility for individuals with fewer resources.

- **More efforts could be envisaged in terms of funding to reach out and provide information to vulnerable and marginalised groups.** This can be facilitated by schools and civil society organisations that are at the frontline and in the best position to reach out to them, but often lack sufficient capacity for this. Information materials and funds will be needed for this.

- Consider the possibility of a **specific add-on to the Erasmus Charter** for those institutions that are **committed to increasing inclusiveness** - not only in terms of a "label" but with attached additional budget.

- **Collect more qualitative and quantitative data on the programme's inclusiveness** to ensure a continued effective response. More research is needed on the distandvanted groups' needs and ways to provide for them. Currently the programme does not favour European-wide research on the needs of such groups. Previous research has tended not to reach out to the most deprived but instead to people with the means to participate in studies, etc.

- **Enhance monitoring of approved projects** and how they are addressing inclusion-related issues. Despite the consistent sections in the application forms for fewer opportunities, there is very little monitoring on the real inclusion of (young) people with fewer opportunities in the approved projects.

- For individual mobilities in the VET sector, for example, a more inclusive approach should be applied as typically it is the case that the best students are sent to international mobility while there would be many benefits for giving more opportunities to more disadvantaged students, including by providing appropriate support measures in the different Key Actions. For this target group **additional support services are necessary** to facilitate the mobility arrangements for host and sending organisation.

- The Youth Chapter **should provide more support to youth organisations** to better reach out to disadvantaged young people and engage them in their activities on a long-term basis. Youth work, volunteering and non-formal education can be particularly effective in reaching out to and engaging disadvantaged young people and those in the situation of NEETs, by providing them with opportunities to partake in more inclusive educational activities through the work of youth organisations.

- **Opportunities for learners of all ages in the non-formal sector and their educators and trainers, who might be volunteers, should also be provided for in Erasmus+**. A great deal of euro-skepticism and intolerance comes from older people and they also suffer from lack of opportunities for cross-border learning experiences in general. The possibility to participate in Erasmus+ in a similar way to that which was possible under the old Grundvig programme would significantly strengthen the potential of Erasmus+ to promote inclusion and greater understanding of the value and role of the EU for broader sections of the population than is currently possible.

- Only a minority group benefits from the opportunities offered by Erasmus+ because of lack of knowledge about them. More efforts and resources should be put into **information provision for potential beneficiaries**, especially those with fewer opportunities.

- Reporting on projects using a simplified grant system should foresee the possibility to include evidence of the contribution of volunteers to the project. Projects including **volunteer time contribution should receive additional points** at the evaluation stage. In case the programme foresees budgets based on real costs, volunteer time contribution should be recognised as eligible co-funding.

- **More flexible formats to calculate the budget of planned activities should be allowed** to accommodate more creative approaches (e.g. itinerant activities, preparatory meetings, follow-up of mobility, online activities and any other creative format/method that might emerge).

2. Cross-sector and lifelong learning approach

The next generation of the Erasmus+ programme should have an architecture that **facilitates cross-sectoral engagement,** especially in education and training, as the current edition has proved somewhat limited for such cooperation and in building bridges between different learning environments. Recommended actions include:

- Extend the **possibility to submit cross-sectorial strategic partnerships under KA2** to CSOs (e.g. partnerships between schools and CSOs, and / or between formal, non-formal and informal education) and ensure that evaluators have a broad understanding of all learning sectors, including non-formal education, through more regular meetings and trainings.

- Further emphasis should be given to the **lifelong learning dimension** of the programme by having it as a **cross-cutting programme objective**. Lifelong learning should be at the heart of all sectors, projects and programme actions.

- We encourage the Commission to more strongly promote the **relevance of projects that target several education and training sectors**, that have a lifelong learning approach and promote flexible pathways. This will also require expert evaluators to have a broad understanding of educational areas including non-formal education and a better understanding of lifelong learning as a holistic concept that is not strictly limited to learning post-graduation.

3. European added value and decentralisation

The future of learning in Europe and the European dimension of education requires a successor programme with a better balance between centralised and decentralised management in order to allow all levels to be mobilised. The decentralisation of the Erasmus+ funding has brought some positive and other less positive effects with it: while we observed an increase of participation of different type of organisations, we also saw more projects overlap and fragmentation in the sector not leading to any substantial impact or any kind of innovation. This resulted in less focus on common goals instead of one programme we had over 30 programmes across Europe included under the Erasmus+ label. New individuals were reached but many more others were reached several times. European policy priorities in education and training were somehow hindered by national priorities in the field often replacing existing national funds which were reduced. In addition, such decentralisation has affected the multiplier role of Europe-wide network organisations, many of them headquartered in Brussels. Recommended actions include:

- Support for large-scale policy projects with more systemic impact and strong European added value will be needed. **Centralised funding actions should be strengthened and aim to support** the innovation and European dimension to allow cross-Europe projects and cooperation to take place. The latter is the best way to have an overview of country-specific needs and spot common challenges, which can then lead to work on common solutions, e.g Forward Looking Cooperation, Social Inclusion Call. In the current programme this has proved difficult because of the limited scope of KA2 (Strategic Partnerships) and limited budget of KA3 (Support for Policy Reform).

- We call for a **partial centralisation of the management of KA2 projects** at the EACEA level (+5%) or alternatively increase the financial provision of KA3 where similar actions as strategic partnerships could be awarded.

- Allow the **participation of representatives (who are often volunteers)** from European networks who are not resident in one of the countries where project partners are situated to take part in activities in KA2 and KA3 projects. For example, currently the president of an organisation living a country other than one of the partner countries cannot participate in project meetings with all costs covered by the project since only staff travelling from the country in which the legal constitution is declared can be covered by the project.

- Better **coordination between the national agencies** to match projects working on similar issues and to avoid unnecessary project overlap and duplication – coordinators' meetings could be organised to share results and therefore bring EU added value.

- **Better visibility about project results and especially the intellectual outputs** of existing projects will require extra efforts for the NAs and EACEA to avoid repetition and allow upscaling possibilities, for instance, through the development of a more user-friendly platform as a database for partners and project and resource centre for national agencies. It can often be difficult for both applicants and evaluators to really know if the proposed approach in a project is innovative or not. Measures to resolve this, would make clear the programme's European dimension and added value and thus improve overall satisfaction with the programme.

4. Coordination and consistency between NAs

To ensure effective implementation, the next generation of the programme should put more focus on promoting coordination among NAs and common guiding principles. The user guide and financial regulation alone have proved insufficient in preventing different interpretation of rules and consequently their implementation in different ways. Measures to overcome challenges that are caused by Member States' different financial regulations (accounting and auditing) should be part of the new proposal. Examples of this being a barrier for transnational cooperation can be found in the current European Social Fund Transnational Calls. Many NAs have developed different tools helping evaluators which can be shared among them, and NAs could benefit from peer learning opportunities facilitated by the European Commission. The decentralisation of the programme at national and regional level has the advantage that applicants can rely on the national agencies and regional information services in order to get information. However, the services offered vary a lot from country to country. There is a clear **lack of consistency** between the agencies[1]. Since 2014 beneficiaries have been collecting examples of discrepancies and inconsistencies in the implementation of the programme among different NAs. Recommended actions include:

- A **searchable repository of intellectual outputs** and the possibility for applicants to prove similar projects have not been carried out - although it requires all to have more incentives such as upscaling and mainstreaming possibilities.

- To put in place a system that would guide National Agencies towards **common quality standards** (e.g. EU-CoE Quality framework for learning mobility in the field of youth).

- To make the available budgets per Key Action and per sector easily accessible after each application round on every NA's website in order to allow applicants to plan

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[1] In the 2017 LLLP Erasmus+ implementation survey, only 23% of respondents applying through more than one NA thought the rules were implemented in the same way (*Erasmus+ Implementation Survey 2017* – Results, p11)

strategically their future actions, as well as results of project selection and budget lines, so that adequate external monitoring of the programme can take place.

- Define **European implementation guidelines or a European "FAQ"** answering the most frequently asked questions to the various NAs. The European Commission could centralise the information and share it with applicants and the NAs in order to ensure a more standardised interpretation of the programme rules.

- More **networking opportunities**, or forums to share and exchange practices in projects, building partnerships should be supported within the country e.g. Erasmus+ promoteurs network in France.

- More **meetings between beneficiaries and NA staff**, for instance to visit projects as a uniform practice.

5. Simplification

The focus on accessibility and simplification should continue in the next iteration of the Erasmus+ programme. Potential candidates are frequently discouraged by the application procedures as well as by the administrative burdens that come with managing EU projects. Even though applicants appreciate the use of flat rates, the **increase in bureaucracy** is a major problem for many, although this depends mostly on the specific NAs. For example, in the school sector, teachers have to go through their administration in order to submit projects. The whole process tends to **favour bigger institutions including specialised consultancies**. The nature of programme beneficiaries' specific profile calls for better attention to their capacity to undertake a project application for which the process is long, time consuming and success rate low. We welcome the proposal for small-scale partnerships as a step in the right direction but we recommend a few more steps to ensure a more simplified and streamlined programme:

- The current **e-form** could be improved especially as regards the financial section (offering a financial overview, limited the number of clicks, etc.) for projects involving more than 5 partners.

- More **clear instructions and a clearer distinction of questions** will be needed in the e-form as in its current guise the questions are often confusing and overlapping for example the impact and dissemination part.

- Make **clear the auditing rules for management costs** which should have a dedicated section in the future programme user guide and grant agreements (in current programme the flat rate and simplified reporting system is not applied by all NAs).

- Use of **digital solutions would help simplifying administrative burden**. For example the EU-login profile of partners and beneficiaries should be the only request for information on the organisations' expertise and description, in KA3 partners are asked twice to describe their work and expertise.

- Ensure very **clear rules for the participation of companies** (in T-VET and other sector projects).

- **Support services** such as capacity building for the applicants with fewer resources.

- **Simplification and shortening of the application and evaluation process** across all activities by avoiding overlapping questions.

- **Support the creation of a database for sectors** where the outreach of potential partners for project is more difficult (e.g. VET sector).

- **Support partnership creation** through online tools but also by promoting large European networks. According to LLLP Erasmus+ Annual Implementation Survey the majority of beneficiaries rely on existing European networks for establishing partnerships.

6. Quality information and user-friendly programme

The next generation of the Erasmus+ **programme guide** should be easy-to-use and tailored to help new organisations, small organisations and institutions with limited capacities to better access the programme. The NAs should be trained in order to offer quality information and guidance services especially targeted at organisations who would gain a lot from their participation in Erasmus+. Today we observe that more and more private consultancies are securing funds with successful project applications at the expense of smaller educational institutions, youth organisations and other civil society organisations in the lifelong learning field. Recommended actions include:

- The programme guide should be written in a **more user-friendly language** - avoiding or at least clearly explaining terms such as "intellectual output", "exploitation", etc.

- Each year the Programme Guide should **be accompanied by an annex that clearly explains modifications** from the previous version.

- Provide clear indications as to which documents are needed at each stage of the project cycle and provide samples of those documents in a clear and accessible way (e.g. auditing rules).

- Ensure that NAs and EACEA have enough resources to be able to **improve the implementation of the programme**, for example, by organising regular meetings with beneficiaries and visits to projects.

7. Quality evaluation and feedback

The next generation of the programme should pay particular attention to ensure transparency in the evaluation process. Currently, however, too many applicants feel that the external experts that are doing the evaluation of their projects lack insight about their field and lack the capacity to evaluate innovation. Some applicants who failed in the first round of KA2, decided to re-submit their projects by taking into account the comments made by the evaluators; because other evaluators are involved in the second round, they sometimes get completely different evaluations that are not recognising progress made and sometimes even criticise what was praised by the first. To optimise transparency in the future programme, recommended actions include:

- **More transparency on the way applications are evaluated**: extensive quality feedback should be given to all applicants, with adequate time and support for evaluators in being able to provide this feedback.

- For **re-submitted projects**, provisions should be made to either 1) designate the same evaluators for the same project in a second round or 2) give access to the new evaluators to the previous form and previous evaluation report.

- Put in place an evaluation system that would allow applicants to receive **punctual feedback** on the different parts of their applications. All NAs should **train the evaluators** before they assess projects so that they have sufficient knowledge to evaluate especially cross-sector projects and those with a policy focus.

- More **capacity building for expert evaluators** should be foreseen and clearer evaluation guidelines, along with guidance on how to contextualise and apply them. Some NAs have developed such guidelines and could share with others.

- The **evaluation process could be supported** by a systematic 1- 5 scale system of scoring for each sub question of the criteria being assessed in order to reach the final score for that criteria. Moreover, the subsections of each criteria included in the evaluator guidelines should be the same as those included on the application form.

8. Policy support actions and civil society cooperation

Important actions under the former Lifelong Learning Programme, such as the transfer of innovation networks, multilateral projects and policy networks, are no longer supported. The

decentralisation of the Erasmus+ programme has led to an unfavourable situation for most European civil society organisations, often based in Brussels, which represent a diverse range of learners, teachers, educators, youth organisations and education providers (being them formal, non-formal and informal), often based in Brussels. Recommended actions include:

- **Increase the overall budget for Civil Society Cooperation in KA3 for both education and training as well as youth and sport.** Longer term structural support to European CSOs should be ensured in the form of proper operating grants as they are the main stakeholders promoting information about the programme, raising awareness about EU policy priorities and, crucially, informing EU decision makers about the concerns and needs of European citizens and residents, essential to develop and implement European Policies in the field of Education, Training, Youth and Sport. This should favour in particular representative organisations whose main mission is to voice citizens' concerns and whose independence should be ensured in order to remain the critical friend of the programme. Additionally, European CSOs actively contribute to capacity building when offering guidance, expertise and support during the application drafting process to smaller organisations (often their members).

- **CSOs in education, training, youth and sport are the ones receiving a lower amount of funding for operational support** as compared to other sectors such as a health, social affairs, gender equality, and culture. In addition, within the sectors itself there are differences. This is hindering their capacity to create a large-scale debate and engage learners, educators, youth workers and young people in building European integration. The level of the operating grants they receive should be re-considered and better aligned to that of other sectors, with support for both cross-sectoral umbrella organisations, on one hand, and the European networks working on specific target groups / sectors, on the other. Moreover, the European Commission should be more prompt in confirming results of operating grant applications and reporting procedures and in issuing payments in order to minimise debt risks and cash flow issues for the organisations concerned.

- **Provide a solution for European CSOs. Many European CSOs based in Belgium** have to apply for Erasmus+ grants (KA1 and KA2) in one of the Belgian NAs. This situation has been creating fierce competition and frustration for both European and Belgian CSOs applying. Belgium only receives a small part of the overall Erasmus+ budget and the success rates are therefore very low which is discouraging for many applicants. The 10% increase to the overall budget of the Belgian NAs is not sufficient - action is needed to both open more possibilities for European CSOs to apply at the centralised level and alleviate the pressure on the Belgian NAs. Even though to a much lesser extent, the same case exists with European CSOs in other countries.

- **Funding should be made available for large-scale projects that support at the same time research actions, policy experimentation and upscaling of good practices**. These actions are best managed at a centralised level and require the involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders. In addition, this can help synergies with other programmes as these stakeholders have a better knowledge and connection to other sectors such as health, employment, social affairs, etc. CSOs at EU level are in the best position to identify good practices from the local and national level and support their up-scaling potential. Often European CSO projects are inspired by local initiatives, e.g. Social Erasmus (by Erasmus Student Network).

The Erasmus+ Civil Society Coalition is a group of more than 40 European Civil Society Networks active in the field of education, training, youth and sport. They represent key stakeholders in Europe active in the Erasmus+ Programme. This civil society alliance is led by the Lifelong Learning Platform and the European Youth Forum.

The members of the Coalition aim to create ownership on EU policies and to voice the concerns and needs of millions of citizens to the EU. They play a crucial role as intermediaries and multipliers in informing and involving education, training and youth actors in EU cooperation and policy-making and in disseminating cooperation outputs. They can reach a critical mass and ensure a long-term impact.

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