

Erasmus+ into the next era

**a contribution from the NA Directors in the fields of
Education & Training and Youth**

**to the Final Evaluation Erasmus+ 2014–2020
and the Interim Evaluation Erasmus+ 2021–2027**

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EUROPEAN UNION

Erasmus+
Enriching lives, opening minds.

This paper represents the opinions of the directors of National Agencies with activities in the areas of education, training and youth in Erasmus+. The NA Directors dispose of vast experience in the implementation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes as well as in all the areas of education, training and youth. This allows them to have a well-informed point of view of the final results of the previous programme and the current programme development and allows them a clear definition of the desiderata for the future programme starting in 2028.

Prologue

In 2017, the NA Directors Education & Training shared a paper titled 'Erasmus+ Expectations for the Future' as a contribution to the mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme 2014–2020. In the same year, NA Directors Youth discussed and drafted a document as their 'Common input for the mid-term evaluation 2017'. As the Final Evaluation of the 2014–2020 programme and the Interim Evaluation of the 2021–2027 programme are underway, the NA Directors would once again like to share their common views on what works well, what has to be improved in the present programme, and their input for the next programme.

What works

After ten years as a single programme for activities in support of education, training, youth and sport, Erasmus+ has been able to strike **a good balance between continuity and innovation**, by building on the experiences of predecessor programmes and at the same time adding new opportunities for exchange and collaboration. The **wide variety of formats** for mobilities offer numerous opportunities to learn and develop. The partnerships offer appropriate options for many institutions and organisations in different phases of professionalisation and integration of international activities.

The current structure of Erasmus+ with **centralised and decentralised actions**, with dedicated parts or chapters for the various sectors, with individual and group mobility and with partnership projects assures not only an impact at the individual level but also at the organisational and systemic level. The Erasmus+ programme is currently the EU calling card or shop window to a large audience across Europe. Arguably, of all EU initiatives and programmes, Erasmus+ is one of the best known, it **comes closest to the citizens** and has a large-scale reach across Europe.

The **horizontal priorities have connected Erasmus+ to broader societal challenges**, which further increased the relevance of the programme. The four priorities (Inclusion & Diversity; Digital Transformation; Environment and fight against climate change; and Participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement) are perceived as well-chosen, as they are not only pivotal to the further development of Europe, but also connect well with topics that already are of high importance in education and training curricula and programmes. The development of inclusion and diversity strategies at national level and the provision of additional support for those with fewer opportunities have supported the movement towards more inclusive mobility. And 'Green Erasmus' has not only stimulated green travel, but also contributes to awareness and actions in relation to the green transition in Europe.

The introduction of **accreditations** for all sectors of education, training and youth provides organisations that want to organise mobility activities on a regular basis with simplified access to funding for these mobilities. Award of the accreditation confirms that the applicant has set up an

integrated, strategic plan to implement high quality mobility activities as part of a wider effort to develop their organisation. With a more stable access to funding, organisations can focus on their long-term goals and use the mobility activities to gradually raise the quality of learning and teaching to a new level.

The use of **unit costs and lump sums** in lieu of the reimbursement of actual costs, previously already in place in part of the predecessor programmes, has reduced the administrative burden for both beneficiaries and National Agencies. In general, this outweighs the lesser extent to which the National Agencies can check the legitimacy of project costs.

SALTO Resource Centres help to improve the quality and impact of the programme at a systemic level through providing expertise, resources, information and training activities in specific areas for National Agencies and other actors involved in the programme. They bring complementary expertise to the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme. In general, the establishment of various forms of **cooperation between National Agencies and between National Agencies and the European Commission** has strengthened the further development and implementation of the programme.

Last but not least, the **increased budget for the 2021–2027 programme** has initially made it possible to sustain Erasmus+ mobilities and projects at the level of the previous programme and facilitates further growth in the years to come. The uptake of the budget was severely hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic that almost brought mobility to a standstill, but recent figures show that the interest in the programme remains high, with applications bouncing back to the same levels or higher than before the pandemic.

All in all, Erasmus+ has developed **from a programme to a funding ecosystem**, supporting the implementation and continuous development of European strategic cooperation in the field of education, training and youth.

What has to be improved in the current programme

The main obstacle for a smooth implementation of the Erasmus+ programme has undoubtedly been and still is the **poor IT architecture**. After a bumpy start in 2014, the programme experienced a similar, but even longer lasting crisis in the new programme period. The improper functioning of digital administrative tools, such as the Application Module, the Beneficiary Module and the Project Management Module, has made the processes of application, assessment, reporting, monitoring and project closure extremely demanding. This has led to frustration among potential beneficiaries, beneficiaries and National Agencies alike. It will also raise questions during future audits, as it led to missed deadlines, exceptions and amendments that will not always be easily traceable. Furthermore, the **lack of reliable data** due to the underperformance of the IT tools and platforms will negatively impact the evaluation of the programme. The Erasmus Without Paper project – started simultaneously as a pilot in the higher education sector without being fully fit for purpose – put undue pressure on beneficiaries. The Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) needs to be provided with all the necessary means to further improve the IT infrastructure.

Although the use of unit costs and lump sums has lessened the administrative burden for both beneficiaries and NAs, the intended improvements regarding the **user friendliness of the programme** have not yet materialised. Rules and regulations remain complex, and there are serious concerns regarding the **proportionality of contracts and supporting documents**. It would be advisable to have a multilayered approach, with procedures and documents appropriate to the size and complexity of

Erasmus+ actions, projects and grants in different sectors and on different levels, from informal groups on grass root level to highly institutionalised levels. Particularly in relation to the objective of inclusion, more attention should be paid to the language used in formal and informal communication.

In reaction to unforeseen developments, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the Commission has shown great flexibility in both addressing the challenges posed by those developments and in utilising the opportunities that the Erasmus+ programme offers. However, as the overall budgetary framework for the Erasmus+ programme remained unchanged, the fall in budget depletion for mobilities due to the pandemic needs to be compensated in the remaining years of the programme – resulting in volatile ratios between mobility and partnerships budget over the programme period. Another example which illustrates the ultimate limited ability to accommodate for unexpected developments is the overall relatively disappointing interest for learner mobility in adult education. The option of budget transfers between actions, particularly between Key Action 1 and Key Action 2, was helpful, albeit with limitations. **More flexibility regarding budget transfers between actions from different parts of the programme** would make the programme more responsive to developments that could not be foreseen at the time of the adoption of the Erasmus+ Regulation.

The growth and the increased visibility of the Erasmus+ programme has caught the attention of not only the intended target groups, but also of individuals and organisations that are interested in new revenue models. This calls for a **coordinated approach on suspicions of financial abuse and fraud**, with due consideration of the differences between sectors. The Commission has already introduced new rules and instruments that will enable the National Agencies to close the door for some dubious actors, while keeping the programme accessible for newcomers and small organisations which still need to improve their organisational capacity. This approach should not only be coordinated at the level of decentralised actions managed by National Agencies, but also include centralised actions managed by the Executive Agency (EACEA).

On a more general level, a **stronger connection between centralised and decentralised actions** is required. For potential beneficiaries and beneficiaries, Erasmus+ offers a broad range of opportunities – from individual mobilities and small, short-term projects to large, multiannual partnerships and institutional collaboration in the form of e.g. European Universities and Centres of Vocational Excellence. For them, as for many European Youth NGOs, these opportunities are part of a continuum of potential international activities that are interlinked. They see the National Agency as the entry point for Erasmus+ as a whole, not just for the actions under decentralised management. National Authorities appreciate the role that National Agencies can play in linking the centralised actions to national policies. The Commission has also pointed out that National Agencies have a role in providing information and guidance to applicants for centralised actions in their countries. The National Agencies can only fulfil this role when they receive timely information on a continuous basis. Recently, the Executive Agency (EACEA) has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with many National Agencies, which is a first step towards clarification and strengthening of the **cooperation between EACEA and National Agencies**.

One last improvement should be made with regard to the programme budget in the remaining programme period. The present budget reflects the overall Multiannual Financial Framework of the European Union, with a slow start in the first few years and a steep increase in the last years of the seven-year period. This does not fit the more gradual growth of the demand for and ability to absorb budget in the world of education and training. Moreover, there might be a sharp decrease of the budget at the start of a new programme compared to the 2027 budget. To prevent such a serious budget drop, **programme budget from 2026 and 2027 should be frontloaded** to 2024 and 2025,

particularly since there will also be 'recycled budget' from unspent funds in the years of the COVID-19 pandemic that will be added to the programme budget in later years.

Desiderata for a future Erasmus+

One of the strongest features of Erasmus+ is its **adaptability to the needs of the citizens of Europe**. In the early 2010s, the socio-economic situation in Europe was characterised in particular by large-scale skills gaps and unemployment among young people. Erasmus+ was designed to equip citizens with the knowledge, skills and experiences to better cope with these challenges, by offering opportunities for **reskilling, upskilling, talent building and retention**. In the late 2010s, the socio-economic situation improved, but the gap between those who could benefit from that and those who couldn't, expanded and a growing number of people felt left out. This called for more focus on the **inclusion** of young people in the labour market and on cherishing a sense of belonging. The covid-pandemic struck young people, more than others, in their social life and the development of relations with their peers. The issue of mental health and resilience is, since then, an important theme in the programme. And now, in the early 2020s, when tensions are running high within Europe and elsewhere in the world, the programme needs to offer possibilities to promote **values that are shared across Europe** and address topics that challenge these values. Civic education, citizenship, critical thinking and social participation have become more central to the programme. This **unique combined contribution of education, training and youth work to the economic, social and cultural development of Europe and its citizens** makes Erasmus+ a true flagship of the European Union. At the same time, Erasmus+ is not the panacea for all ills in society, nor only in the area of education, training and youth work.

In order to maximise the potential of Erasmus+, it is crucial that the next programme will strike the right **balance** from various perspectives:

- between addressing the major global challenges of our time and the modest contribution of Erasmus+;
- between accessibility & inclusion and quality & accountability;
- between streamlining opportunities & procedures and tailored actions;
- between a programme of flagship actions and a programme of and for the young people of Europe; and
- between innovation in programme actions & initiatives and stability in processes & procedures.

The desired balance can only be reached through a **combination of strength and flexibility** – both are therefore crucial in the next Erasmus+ programme. This requires the following prerequisites:

- **Erasmus+ should remain close to the people**. For a strong, largely decentralised programme it is easier to detect and respond to (changes in) the needs of people. This is all the more important given the long timespan between the adoption of a new programme and its implementation up to and including 2034 – more than ten years from now.
- For the Youth sector, the programme should strongly **support the objectives of the EU Youth Strategy** and effectively communicate about its systemic impact on the field in achieving these. The eleven goals of the EU Youth Strategy, as the outcome of the EU Youth Dialogue, should be more explicitly reflected in the programme and the programme guides and be translated into specific and concrete actions and formats.

- **Centralised actions** such as the European Universities Initiative, the Centres of Vocational Excellence and the Teacher Academies can contribute strongly to the further development of the European Education Area. They **should add value** to the international cooperation **but not replace or suppress other actions**. They should not create any form of exclusion by enlarging the gap between those who do participate in these actions and those who do not.
- Similarly, while an Erasmus+ accreditation should continue to give an easy access to the programme, and to provide for a streamlined process for the renewal of accreditations and the Erasmus Charter for Higher Education (ECHE) for 2028, there also need to remain enough **opportunities for non-accredited organisations**, which must be reflected in the budget reservations for both accredited and non-accredited organisations.
- The **development of competences and European values**, also through non-formal learning activities, is an essential contribution of the programme to (young) people's lives and should remain an integral part of the programme.
- While physical mobility should remain the core of the programme, **virtual and blended learning should become more prominent elements** in the Erasmus+ programme, with clear activity and funding structures in all sectors. Where the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the inequalities between groups in society in benefiting from digitalisation in education and training and in youth work, it has also demonstrated the potential of online learning as an additional gem in the crown.
- The international dimension in Erasmus+ has played an important role in higher education and in the youth sector, and has more recently been expanded to vocational education and training. The possibility to **expand the international dimension to school education and adult education** should be further explored, especially with regard to teacher and staff mobilities.
- **Broadening the scope of Sport activities** from mobility for coaches and staff to a broader group of (young) people would increase the impact of the programme in this field.
- Erasmus+ is highly instrumental in pioneering new forms of international cooperation, but **can and should never exclusively and permanently provide the structural funding** that is required for sustained institutional collaboration in education and training.
- A **(re-)integration of** initiatives such as eTwinning, Europass, EPAL and Euroguidance in Erasmus+ would strongly contribute to a 'one-stop-shop' approach and therefore enhance clarity and simplicity for potential beneficiaries and beneficiaries. In addition, it would increase the National Agencies' efficiency by combining different strands of Work Programmes, (Yearly) Reports and communication and information efforts into one.
- The **synergy with other programmes and initiatives**, such as Horizon Europe and the European Social Fund, should be reinforced. Positive experiences from member states and at the EU level from the European Solidarity Corps should be taken into account. This should primarily be coordinated by the European Commission, at the European level.
- The **IT infrastructure needs to be fully operational** from the start. This requires stability in programme actions, business rules, processes and procedures, sufficient resources and some

further unification between sectors, as well as a clear action plan with deliverables and deadlines and extensive testing in collaboration with National Agencies and beneficiaries.

- The decision about the financial foundation for a future programme is a political one. As National Agencies, we can only stress the importance of a **balance between the ambitions for the future Erasmus+ programme and its funding**. Without expressing a preference, we can foresee various scenarios. To maintain the scope and impact at the level of 2027 for subsequent years, a **doubling of the total budget** would be a minimum requirement. This, however, would not take into account any increases in the scope of the programme. As demand is already now clearly higher than the available budget, and grant rates have not always kept up with inflation, this might call for another scenario. A **tripling of the total budget** would allow for some growth over the years 2028–2034, but would still require a choice between a further focus on target groups with fewer opportunities, supporting green travel and facilitating the potential for broad participation. For the future programme to be able to adequately address the multitude of needs, identified and highlighted in the Commission’s recent proposal for a recommendation on learning mobility in Europe ‘Europe on the Move’, a total budget that is **five times the budget of today** would be required. Only then would it be possible to properly incorporate new actions and target groups in the programme, adequately address inclusion and sustainability topics, further enhance the role of the programme in advancing the main political priority themes, as well as cater to the growing demands within the existing target groups. All three scenarios also put pressure on the efforts required by the National Agencies, on their management fee and the decentralised budgets.
- Furthermore, we would like to stress the importance of a **gradual and predictable development of the budget, from the very start of the programme**, and the need for **flexibility in the use of funds** in terms of budget transfers within projects and between key actions. Erasmus+ has an excellent track record in terms of budget depletion, and an insufficient budget with consecutive low success rates would jeopardise the willingness of institutions and organisations to engage in the programme, regardless the need and demand for budgetary support for international exchange and collaboration.

Closing remark

Erasmus+ has proven to be an extremely valuable European initiative, with impact at personal, organisational and systemic level. This impact is seen by those participating in and affected by the programme. We strongly believe that **Erasmus+ deserves a broader visibility** and we encourage all stakeholders to be(come) ambassadors for Erasmus+. This will also help to reach those who have not yet discovered this unique European programme.

This document reflects discussion outcomes that were shared unanimously or with a very large consensus among the NAs in the field of education, training and youth. It does not necessarily reflect the opinion of each National Agency in all aspects.