

Erasmus+ expectations for the future

a contribution from the NA Directors Education & Training

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Erasmus+

This paper represents the opinions of the directors of National Agencies with activities in the areas of education and training in Erasmus+¹. It is based on the discussions held in informal meetings in Zaandam/NL and Prague/CZ in 2016 and in St. Julian's/Malta in 2017. Part of these meetings was dedicated to experiences with Erasmus+ since 2014, the midterm evaluation in 2016 and the expectations regarding the future programme starting in 2021.

The group of directors from nearly all participating programme countries dispose of vast experience in the implementation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes as well as in the all areas of E&T. This allows them to have a well-informed point of view of the current programme development and allows them a clear definition of the desiderata for the future programme beginning in 2021.

What works

The move to Erasmus+ from the former LLP and YiA is perceived as the right step in the development of the European programmes and Erasmus+ is well esteemed at all levels: national, organisational and individual. Having a single brand name brings a better visibility at the political level and for a broader public, although it has not been without challenges. But **the brand name stands for the European spirit** and for the history of success in various European activities in Education & Training which is even more important in the year of the 30th anniversary of the European programmes. The programmes are perceived as best measures to promote the value of education and the values that are shared across Europe.

The Erasmus+ programme is currently the EU calling card or shop window to a large audience across Europe. Arguably, of all EU initiative and programmes, **Erasmus+ comes closest to the citizens** and has a large-scale reach across Europe. And the increased budget of Erasmus+ compared with LLP and YiA enables an even wider sphere of influence and increases the potential for impact. The current structure of Erasmus+ with centralised and decentralised actions, with individual mobility and with partnership projects assures not only an impact at the individual level but also at the organisational and systemic level.

In addition, **the programme has brought managerial improvements** compared to the predecessor programmes. The reduction of number of different project types has made the management of the programme more efficient and has made the programme more simple for applicants and beneficiaries. The introduction of unit costs might be seen as one example. The introduction of more extensive ICT tools is also a must for such a larger programme and e.g. the electronic application system has been functioning well.

The **decentral management of Erasmus+ funding by the National Agencies** has a number of positive elements. National Agencies can (together with their National Authorities) connect European policies with national policies, and thus contribute to more coherence and synergy in policies, which is beneficial both for the success of the Erasmus+ programme and for educational institutions in their effort to create a sustainable internationalisation strategy. Being literally close to beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries enables the National Agencies to encourage them to apply and to provide them with advice and feedback, thus improving the quality of project proposals and project implementation.

The **International Dimension in Higher Education is another key asset** for the current generation European E&T programmes because it offers the Higher Education Institutions needed tools to engage with new international partner countries and to complement their existing international linkages with partner countries with new staff and student mobility and institutional capacity-building. Especially

the International Credit Mobility scheme fuels the European structural programmes with partners outside of Europe.

Yet another positive element in the programme is the opportunity for **cross-sectoral cooperation**. Cross-sectoral cooperation can be a real source of innovation and transformation of educational systems and provides opportunities for collaboration and networking with youth organisations. Having similar procedures and processes for all sectors also simplifies the development and implementation of joint projects across sectors.

What has to be improved in the current programme

The student loan system has not reached the intended scope and is not likely to do so. The designated funds have not been fully utilised because up to now there are only four European banks participating. These funds should be re-allocated to areas of the programme with pressure of demand.

The quite advanced ICT system of the programme needs, although improvements are visible, still further development like an entrance via one portal only, more stability of the databases etc. **Poor usability of ICT tools and a lack of interoperability between systems** together with the administrative and financial rules have made the programme less attractive to some target groups. It has potentially damaged the image of the programme at the level of institutional applicants, especially of smaller institutions and marginalised groups. Equal chances to participate in the programme have to be offered to the full spectrum of possible applicants, who will differ in awareness, needs and expectations.

The beneficiary's experience of the programme is how its success must be judged, and **user experience should be a clear focus** and driver for the design of the successor programme including a user interface that is fit for purpose in terms of the rules and the ICT tools that applicants, beneficiaries and NA staff have to deal with.

Individual participants are often not aware that Erasmus+ is an EU programme, because the participant's experience is managed through the beneficiary organisations. There is a need to strengthen communication activities including the use of programme branding, so that **individual beneficiaries are aware that Erasmus+ is an EU programme**, and are encouraged to feel that the EU works for them.

In the current situation **cross-sectoral cooperation has not been fully realised** although it is supported by the National Agencies. It could be increased if the streamlined administrative and financial rules would allow more flexibility – also between formal, informal and non-formal learning.

Desiderata for a future Erasmus+

On an operational level

Recognizing our role and with our experience at the operational level we see that a future programme should build on the strengths and successful actions of Erasmus+. The ambition should not be a reshuffle but a continuous improvement. That means among other aspects to **keep the decentralised actions as decentralised ones** and to continue to allow a **variety of National Agencies with different specialisations** depending on the national context. This will be even more important in Europe's future where the citizens are getting more tired of the European idea as shown by growing of Europe-phobia

in part of the public and political discourse. That can only be met by demonstrating relevance to the needs and interests of individual citizens, which should be a major target of Erasmus+ and can be realised by National Agencies.

The inclusion has to be understood even wider than the inclusion of those with special needs, or of migrants and refugees. **The programme needs to demonstrate the real benefits of European cooperation** to those who abandoned the European idea, those who doubt it and those who do not perceive the advantages of Europe and marginalised groups in general. Education is, at all levels, at the core of what European co-operation should be all about – freedom of expression, freedom to study and research, freedom of movement, of assembly, of respect, tolerance and acceptance of difference.

Strategic choices

Erasmus+ is a visionary programme with high-level strategic aims, and the future programme will also need to start from a big picture that sets the overarching objectives and priorities for seven years. However, **thematic flexibility is needed in the next generation, too**. It will therefore be of great importance to set objectives which are relevant at the inception of the new programme and can also be adapted to meet new strategic priorities.

Erasmus+ is based on the socio-economic situation in Europe in the early 2010s characterised in particular by large-scale skills gaps and unemployment among young people. A future Erasmus+ programme has to continue to address this topic but during the current generation we have also had to face many unforeseeable dramatic developments in Europe. **The inclusion of young people in the labour market will still be of highest importance for social inclusion and stability. But a future programme should also offer possibilities to promote values that are shared across Europe** and address topics that challenge these values, as they arise, and even at short notice. In the spirit of a holistic approach to education and training, the new programme should also emphasise civic education, citizenship, critical thinking and social participation.

This includes **the transfer of successful features from one area into another**, such as the International Dimension (currently restricted to HE and Youth) and decentralised actions in support for policy reform (currently restricted to Youth). Preferably, this would go hand in hand with a simplification of procedures, towards more alignment with overall procedures within the Erasmus+ programme.

The new programme should also support, in a more systematic way, **alternative ways of international cooperation by fully utilizing social media and other on-line communication tools and by supporting mobility with real-time virtual mobility**. This is important in particular in sectors where physical mobility has restrictions (e.g. schools) but can also complement and strengthen the quality and impact of mobility in other sectors.

With regard to the financial foundation for a future programme, we support the observations made by the Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC), which show that **a total budget increase of more than 40%** is required to maintain the funding at the level of 2020 for subsequent years. Even now, demand is higher than the available budget. Reducing the individual grant levels for mobilities in order to raise the number of participants is not a good solution, because it would negatively influence the participation of disadvantaged groups, which is already a matter of concern. The cooperation in partnerships within different institutions in Europe also already suffers from a lack of funding.

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.

Smooth introduction of a robust successor programme

The implementation framework requires a careful step by step planning and development of the implementation side. This is a huge task taking into account the scope of the programme and diversity of participating countries/target groups/cultures, and should not be under-estimated. A smooth introduction of the new programme would have a powerful positive effect on public perceptions, in comparison with the bumpy start experienced for Erasmus+. In order to be ready to implement the programme on 1 January, **we need to have final EU decisions in place much earlier** than happened in 2013. Alternatively, if it's not possible to bring the decision-making timetable forward at EU level, we need fewer changes in the first year of the new programme, instead phasing in new features during the first two years. This gives National Agencies and beneficiaries time to prepare for the changes and implement them effectively. Most of the complaints we received in 2014 related to ICT tools, documents and funding not being ready in time.

Whereas fresh thinking and flexibility in the overall objectives and aims of the next generation programme are welcome, **stability and consistency are needed in the fundamental structure and rules** of the programme, including the key actions and programme rules. Stability gives a basis for applicants, beneficiaries and National Agencies alike to have confidence in the programme from the beginning and to experience efficiency and quality in its management and delivery throughout its lifetime. As Erasmus+ has grown over 30 years from earlier, smaller and experimental programmes to a single large-scale €14.7 billion programme, we simply cannot afford to have major implementation problems for the next generation.

At the same time, a certain amount of **flexibility is also of relevance in the execution of the programme** in different countries with different legal frameworks or even only different conditions for the applicants. The programme should therefore set the operational modalities only at a general level in order to leave sufficient flexibility for the implementation.

Better accessibility is needed

Finally, **the access to the programme should be made more user friendly** in order to attract many more people and to continue the success story of Erasmus+. At present, access is not only limited by financial restraints, but also by operational and technical aspects. One way of reaching new target groups would be to lower the threshold for participation by introducing a 'fast track' for newcomers and small applicants – a simplified procedure based on the same rules and regulations but with a lesser administrative burden.

Every year, around 670,000 Europeans (young people and adults) gain new knowledge, experience, skills and competences through transnational mobility and cooperation to support their economic, social and cultural capability; and tens of thousands of European organisations participate. The impression they take from their involvement in the Erasmus+ programme determines their impression of the EU overall and EU administration. Therefore one cannot any more overlook the 'end-user experience' and 'user-interface'.

ⁱ This paper does not necessarily represent the views of Denmark.