

Netherlands Position Paper on the Consultation on the Mid-term Evaluation of the Erasmus+ Programme

1. Introduction

In the current European context it is more than ever important that young people and students have the right personal and professional skills to contribute in society, to the labour market and to their personal fulfillment. Society is facing increasing radicalisation and inequality, and the labour market is changing quickly due to globalisation, digitalisation and robotisation. The Erasmus+ programme has been a valuable programme in order to prepare the youth for their future. International experiences in education, training, youth and sport can deliver a major contribution reaching this aim and thereby help to tackle socio-economic challenges.

The Netherlands believes that the Erasmus+ programme is important to foster smart growth and is key to the future of Europe. The programme is a means to internationalization of youth, students and organizations, and a means to exchange knowledge internationally. The current integrated programme is both highly relevant and effective, and has been embraced enthusiastically in the Netherlands. This is also demonstrated by the larger demand for funding of high quality applications than available, for example in the sector vocational education and training, even though the increased budget has enlarged the potential and possibilities of the programme.

The current programme's impact and sustainability is demonstrated by the improved knowledge, skills and competences at individual level and quality improvements at institutional level. The national report of the Netherlands confirms the importance of Erasmus+ for the future and the wish of the stakeholders to continue Erasmus+ beyond 2020. Erasmus+ has contributed to the Europe 2020 targets by funding projects with added value, which would not have found financing otherwise.

In short, we believe Erasmus+ is an essential programme for a strong and competitive Europe and has proven to contribute to smart growth.

Erasmus+ has already proven to be successful. Yet, there is still room for improvement in specific areas. The Midterm Evaluation of Erasmus+ offers an opportunity to assess which improvements could help to achieve the programmes objectives in the current programme and look forward to the future programme. The Netherlands would like to put forward the following priorities and recommendations for the mid-term evaluation of Erasmus+.

2. Priorities and recommendation for the current programme

Continued focus on the **quality** of applications and qualitative added value of projects is necessary and contributes to the **impact** of the programme. According to the national report of the Netherlands, Erasmus+ has proven to be highly relevant with impact on both the individual and institutional level. At the same time, applications tend to focus more on the project period rather than the intended outcomes and impact on institutional level. Applicants should be challenged more to think about the desired long term effects in order to increase the quality and impact of the projects. This could also contribute to the impact of Erasmus+ at societal level.

It is essential to maintain the **focus** of Erasmus+ on the improvement of young people's skills through studying and training abroad, as agreed in 2014. We have noticed an increasing broadening of the initial goals and Key Actions. New big initiatives, in terms of finance and targets, have been launched in the course of 2015-2017, for example the European Solidarity Corps and Erasmus PRO. The yearly work programme should meet the needs of the relevant stakeholders, within the initial focus of the programme. Erasmus PRO is a clear example of a new not stakeholder-driven initiative. The new initiatives will broaden the Erasmus+ programme at the expense of the focus and consequently at the expense of the institutional and societal impact of the programme.

However, taking into account the focus in the programme, we believe it is important to maintain the current possibilities of **flexibility** regarding priorities in the yearly work programme in order to react to political and societal developments, both at European and national levels, under political guidance of the Council. The incorporation of the two priorities 'refugees' and 'prevention of radicalisation' are good examples of the current flexibility in the programme. Sharing best practices between Member States and developing strategic partnerships on those priority topics via relevant calls has proven to be very useful. However, the flexibility and new priorities should always fit within the initial overarching objectives and priorities.

The **administrative burden**, including difficulties relating to IT and the application procedure, continues to be high for both applicants and National Agencies. This especially discourages new applicants and smaller organisations from applying. It is particularly difficult for organisations that focus on young people with fewer opportunities to reach out to and benefit fully from the opportunities Erasmus+ has to offer. The administrative burden should be lowered further in order to offer equal opportunities to participate in the programme to the full range of possible applicants. At the same time, it remains equally important that misuse of funds by participants and institutions is effectively prevented, as this could severely damage the reputation of the programme.

Erasmus+ has difficulty in **reaching young people and students with fewer opportunities**, and voluntary driven organisations, such as youth organisations, sport clubs and smaller federations. Their lack of participation remains a challenge. Raising awareness and encouraging these groups to use the programme more fully would enhance the overall effectiveness of Erasmus+ and increase the societal impact. There should also be an unambiguous definition for the registration of lower opportunity youth and students. In this way, measuring the extent to which these groups have been reached can be done in an unambiguous way. This should lead to increasing awareness among young people and students with fewer opportunities.

Although the current Erasmus+ programme foresees an increase of its annual **budget** over the programme period (2014 - 2020), there is still a much larger demand for funding of high quality applications than there are resources available. It is important to improve the current low success rates of high qualitative applications, for example by reallocating the unused funds of the Master Loan Guarantee Facility of which there are strong doubts concerning the European added value. The annual increasing budget of Erasmus+ could already contribute to the improvement of the current low success rates. Therefore, we welcome the additional appropriation of funds within the 2017 EU-budget for Erasmus+.

3. Priorities and recommendation in the future programme

The Netherlands underlines the added value and effectiveness of the programme and encourages continuation of the programme in order to maintain the strong **contribution to smart growth** comprising exchange of excellent knowledge, improvement of young people's skills through studying and training abroad and opportunities to all students to exploit their full potential to the benefit of their profession and their participation in the wider society. In this respect it is important that we increase our effort to include students of all levels and situations in the future programme, for example in the more practical levels of vocational education and training. Smart growth is emphasized by the Netherlands as part of a modern next Multi-annual Financial Framework. A continuation of the Erasmus+ programme would meet the high demand for participation in Erasmus projects of young people, students and organisations.

Erasmus+ has proven to be successful and we believe it is of utmost importance that the future programme shows **stability and continuity** in succession of the current programme. We should maintain the current fundamental structure and legal rules of the programme. The future programme should again be an integral programme comprising all educational sectors, youth and sport. Stability and continuity give a basis for applicants, beneficiaries and National Agencies to work efficiently and effectively in order to reach maximum impact. We cannot afford to have major implementation problems for the next generation again.

It is important to maintain **focus** in the future programme on goals that pay a maximum contribution to smart growth. Broadening the goals and Key Actions of the programme would be to the detriment of the impact of the programme.

We believe it is important to maintain optimal **flexibility** in the future programme in order to anticipate future political and societal priorities, on both European and national level. This flexibility should fit within the overarching objectives and priorities, under guidance of the Council.

The current opportunities for **cross-sectoral cooperation** should be enlarged and better promoted in the future programme. Encouraging more collaboration between different sectors and stakeholders would increase the quality of the projects and increases the level playing field. Furthermore, it would increase innovation in the education, youth and sport sector because new partners could be reached. Increasing cross-sectoral cooperation could increase and widen the impact of the programme. It could for example contribute to flexible pathways. And a better cooperation between the youth, sport and education sectors will contribute to an increase in participation of young people with fewer opportunities. Furthermore, it is important to better connect with other EU programmes such as the European Social Fund with the aim reaching people with fewer opportunities. Synergies with Horizon 2020 could be sought for students that would continue their excellent research career. We should increase the synergy between the future programme and other EU programmes in order to enhance the added value of these programmes.

The **administrative burden** should be lowered in the future programme. The administrative procedure, including IT and the application procedure, should be simplified in order to offer equal opportunities to participate in the programme. The access to the programme should be made more user friendly in order to attract more people and continue the success of the Erasmus+ programme. The future programme should have a simplified (or 'light') application procedure especially for small new organisations in order to make the programme more accessible to young people and students with fewer opportunities. It is important that this will not be at the expense of the quality of the projects.