



NORWAY'S ADDITIONAL POSITION PAPER ON THE FUTURE EUROPEAN UNION PROGRAMME FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING, FROM 2021.

As an EEA EFTA country with 25 years of participation in the European programme for education, Norway takes a strong interest in contributing to the process leading up to the next programme.

In May 2017 Norway submitted its Preliminary Position paper on the future European Union programme for Education and Training. This was followed by a non-paper submitted to the Commission in December 2017 on better links between research, education and innovation in the next programme period.

The results of the Commissions mid-term review of Erasmus+ supports several of the recommendations in Norway's Preliminary position paper:

- A continuation of the basic architecture and structure of the current programme
- An increased international dimension should be kept in the future programme
- Continue the simplification and streamlining across sectors, including the optimisation of IT tools, and increased budget flexibility

We strongly encourage the Commission to take these findings into account when developing the successor of Erasmus+.

In this Additional Position paper, we wish to further elaborate on a few selected recommendations from the Preliminary Position paper that we consider to be of particular importance, as well as providing additional recommendations on the promotion of the field of Early Childhood Education and Care and continued focus on quality.

1) A new programme should remain largely decentralised

Norway would like to stress the importance of keeping the next programme a ***largely decentralised one***. The broad scope of participation of organisations and institutions is a key contributor to the popularity and recognition of Erasmus+. A more centralised programme would most likely favour bigger and more experienced participants, requiring that applicants have highly specialised skills in terms of project management and application writing.

- The decentralised management of the Erasmus+ programme is essential to promote quality and innovation in education and training including a broad scope of participants and fields. National Agencies (NAs) are well placed to provide support to all potential applicants, as well as to awarded projects and institutions.
- NAs have insight into the administrative and structural framework of participating organisations and institutions, which is essential for providing targeted support and guidance.
- Centralised actions are highly regarded and give status to awarded projects as they are awarded through international competition. However, decentralised actions both in key actions 1 and 2 are essential to reach new applicants, stimulate new partnerships, and build the capacity needed to participate in larger calls both within Erasmus+ centralised actions and Horizon 2020 projects.

- For project support directed towards a wider set of target groups, as within strategic partnerships, decentralisation ensures that newcomers and smaller organisations such as schools, SMEs and NGOs can access and gain experience in the programme.
- Similarly, a decentralised management of international credit mobility is crucial to ensure and sustain the participation of smaller HEIs.

2) *Increased budget flexibility*

Norway recommends to increase the budget flexibility for the NAs in the next programme period. A more flexible distribution of funds would make it easier for NAs to respond to unequal and shifting demands in the different sectors. More flexibility would thus improve the use of available funding, by making it more targeted.

More flexibility would also strengthen the ability to respond to needs at national level. This would improve the relevance of the programme as a political tool responding to sectoral needs. The current system for distribution of funds is not sufficiently flexible to accommodate each country's needs by sector, or even within a given sector.

Suggestions:

- A mechanism that allows NAs to transfer funding between budget years should be explored. In many cases, beneficiaries are unable to use all awarded funding. Currently, unused funding that has been awarded projects or institutions is difficult and in most cases impossible to redistribute.
- Lack of flexibility within some actions is counter-productive for reaching the aims of the action. One example is strategic partnerships, where there are overly prescriptive rules linked to budget categories and funding for activities. In the next programme there should be more room for qualitative assessments of activities, linked to the objectives of the programme. In general, Horizon 2020 and some centralized Erasmus+ actions are more flexible. We recommend that the future education programme has simpler rules, allowing for a more holistic approach to decentralised actions.
- For the **International Credit Mobility (ICM)** action the lack of flexibility is a particular challenge, which leads to unspent funds, but more importantly, makes the administrative burden of the action far too high relative to the available funding. While the rigidity of regional budgets prioritising neighboring regions to the EU has led to more interest and provided new opportunities for cooperation with these regions, there is a need to ensure more efficient administration and increase the budget absorption in the implementation phase. We suggest the following two alternatives: aligning the ICM as much as possible with the Intra-European mobility (KA103)¹ or extending the project period from 26 months till 38 months or more.²

¹ This would provide the institutions with opportunities to 1) enforce collaboration with countries of their own interest and 2) spend a greater amount of allocated funds, by making it possible to redistribute funds between partner countries during the project period according to needs and demands.

² If aligning the ICM with the KA103 proves impossible due to budget restrictions of the financial instruments, we suggest extending the project period of the mobility projects. This will provide the HEIs with a longer time frame, thus increasing their chances to implement the mobilities and adjust to unforeseen events that make implementation difficult. The possibility to apply for an extension of the project period could also serve as a useful measure.

3) Transparency

In the next programme Norway requests more transparency and better access to information regarding centralised actions. Improving the transparency and providing access for national authorities and agencies to more detailed information will increase the number of good applicants for Erasmus+ centralised actions.

Suggestions:

- While there have been significant improvements in making information on centralised actions available to NAs, the system of managing the actions is unsatisfactory. The Commission should consider developing a system of National Contact Points (NCPs), based on Horizon 2020, for all centralised actions under Erasmus+ in order to improve both the visibility of the program and the quality of projects.
The mission of the NCP structure is to ensure *“highly professional support services operating nationally will form an essential component of Horizon 2020 implementation. By spreading awareness, giving specialist advice, and providing on-the-ground guidance, they will ensure that the new programme becomes known and readily accessible to all potential applicants, irrespective of sector or discipline.”* This mission is equally relevant for Erasmus+ centralised actions.
- An NCP structure should implement the same Minimal Standards and Guiding Principles that have been established for Horizon 2020. There are no differences in managing education projects versus research and innovation projects that justify that there are different approaches to actions in the two programmes.
- As in Horizon 2020 calls for NCP network funding could be launched. For Horizon 2020 these calls are important not only to mobilise applicants, but also to share information, train NCPs and balance the capacities between NAs. For higher education such calls could in many cases be more relevant than the current transnational cooperation activities (TCAs). An NCP structure for centralised actions should be an addition to the current operating grant.

4) School education and pupil mobility

One of the successes in Erasmus+ is the institutional approach, and this should be maintained in order to encourage systemic development and more strategic planning in European partnerships. For the school sector it is highly important to offer good funding opportunities for smaller projects supporting school leaders and teachers in their work while at the same time providing ample mobility opportunities for groups of pupils.

- Active pupil involvement is an important asset in successful school development and pupil mobility should be maintained and encouraged also in strategic partnerships in the next programme period. Norway welcomes the new school exchange partnerships introduced in the 2018 work programme, which has already proven to be an attractive action for schools.
- Mobility for pupils is an important tool for internationalisation of the school sector and increased mobility will likely result in better and more inclusive schools, increased student mobility in higher education and improved language skills. Pupil mobility has nearly become invisible in the present programme in spite of efforts made to promote e.g. the opportunities for long-term pupil mobility. There is still room for increasing the number of pupils going abroad both for shorter or longer stays. We strongly recommend the Commission to

introduce actions that facilitate pupil mobility to a higher degree, especially for pupils in upper secondary school. There is no reason why there should be different approaches towards pupil mobility in VET and the School sector.

5) Early Childhood Education and Care

Quality Early Childhood Education and Care lay the foundation for children's development and learning and for active participation in society. It also contributes to social equity, inclusion and work-life balance. Research clearly shows that for ECEC to genuinely contribute to social equity and good outcomes for children it is a prerequisite that the provision is of high quality.

- Through mechanisms in the programme, countries and ECEC institutions can be supported in developing high quality practice. As on other levels of education, quality is dependent on well-qualified teachers/staff and good pedagogical leadership. Exchange of good practices and peer-learning can be effective tools to support the development of quality practices on all levels. Norway therefore recommends targeted actions and would welcome a stronger focus on Early Childhood Education and Care in the next programme.

6) Quality

The European Commission, Member States and other Erasmus+ programme countries have all called for a broader and more inclusive programme in the future. It will be important to reach out to more people with fewer opportunities as well as actors who have not previously participated in the programme. Norway wholeheartedly supports this.

We would, however, like to emphasize the importance of focusing on both inclusion and quality in the next programme, not inclusion vs. quality.

- Quality should be the determining factor in awarding projects. Awarding quality is essential to ensure the recognition and relevance of the programme for all sectors. It is particularly important in the higher education sector in order to ensure the attractiveness of the programme and for the HEIs strategic commitment to the programme at leadership level.
- Within existing funding instruments there are sufficient mechanisms to allow small and large projects. However, new mechanisms to incentivise the involvement of new-comers in projects could be explored, while at the same time maintaining the quality criteria.
- Furthermore, the available funding for projects in the existing actions should not be lowered. Reducing maximum funding available for actions such as knowledge alliances, capacity building and strategic partnerships could significantly affect the attractiveness of the programme for all stakeholders involved, including businesses, NGOs, research institutes, as well as high level researchers and teachers at HEIs. Unit costs are already low compared to the real costs, requiring very high in kind contributions from all stakeholders involved. Funding should thus not be spread thin just in order to facilitate more projects, as these projects then would be poorly funded.