Inclusion measures within the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020

European Implementation Assessment

STUDY

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In December 2020, the European Parliament Conference of Committee Chairs authorised the launch of an implementation report on the Implementation of inclusion measures within Erasmus+ 2014-2020 by the European Parliament Committee of Culture and Education (CULT) (2021/2009(INI)).

The Ex-Post Evaluation Unit (EVAL) of EPRS has been asked to assist in the preparation of the implementation report with a European Implementation Assessment (EIA).

The EIA consists of two parts: an in-house desk-research analysis and two external studies that combine desk research and primary data collection. The focus of the EIA is the learning mobility of individuals and the inclusion of young people with special needs or fewer opportunities.

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Executive summary

In December 2020, the European Parliament Conference of Committee Chairs authorised the launch of an implementation report on the Implementation of inclusion measures within Erasmus+ 2014- 2020 by the European Parliament Committee of Culture and Education (CULT).

In the context of the CULT implementation report, the Ex-Post Evaluation Unit (EVAL) of DG EPRS has been asked to assist in the preparation of the implementation report with a European Implementation Assessment (EIA).

This EIA is the outcome of a research project carried out in-house, by EVAL, and in cooperation with external researchers, and it is intended to provide the parliamentary committee with reliable information, the newest available data and fresh evidence on the implementation, application and effectiveness to date of specific EU law/programmes/policy.

The current EIA consists of two parts:

1   Part I presents in-house desk-research analysis;
2   Part II presents two studies prepared by external experts, based on both desk research and data collection on the ground (one survey and several interviews), as follows:

The first study, written by Prof Maurice de Greef, looks at the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7 of Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013). The second study, written by Prof. Silvia Florea, explores the contribution of the Erasmus+ Youth Inclusion and Diversity Strategy (IDS) to the inclusion of young people and the way this document was reflected in the approach taken by the Erasmus national agencies.

The first part of the EIA (Part I) gives a short presentation of the European approach to education in the broader context of the EU social inclusion policy. Furthermore, it briefly traces the history of the Erasmus+ programme, to then present a number of elements relating to the structure, the budget and the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020.

In the second part (Part II), the focus is on the inclusion of a specific category of participants in the Erasmus + programme: people with special needs or fewer opportunities. The first study examines the mobility of disadvantaged learners and, more specifically, it takes a closer look at how the inclusion measures with regard to learning mobility of individuals (Article 7) has been understood and implemented within the programme countries.[1] The second study looks at the inclusion of young people within the Erasmus+ programme in the 2014-2020 period, with a focus on the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth and its benefits. As regards the inclusion of people with special needs or fewer opportunities, both studies received valuable input from a significant number of national agencies (through a survey and several interviews). The SALTO Inclusion and Diversity Resources Centre[2] also kindly cooperated by providing information and data on the same topic. Together with a literature review and the analysis of relevant policy documents, this freshly collected data enrich the current debate on the inclusion of this specific category of participants in the Erasmus + programme 2014-2020 and on the implementation of the inclusion measures under this programme in general.

The main conclusion of the EIA, based on the findings of two external studies and the analysis of other relevant existing documents, is that the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020 has managed to strengthen the learning mobility of individuals and the participation of young people with special

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[1]   Details on who can participate in the Erasmus+ programme can be found here.

[2]   https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/

needs or fewer opportunities in Erasmus+ projects, and to establish inclusion-related support tools for Erasmus+ applicants and beneficiaries. However, the current assessment, together with other evaluations and research, indicates a need to make these categories even more accessible and inclusive.

Table of contents

Table of figures

Table of frequently used abbreviations and acronyms

CULT	European Parliament Committee on Culture and Education
Commission	European Commission
Council	European Council
DCI	Development Cooperation Instrument
EACEA	European Education and Culture Executive Agency (previously Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency)
EDF	European Development Fund
ENI	European Neighbourhood Instrument
EPSR	European Pillar of Social Rights
EU	European Union
IDS	Erasmus+ Youth Inclusion and Diversity Strategy
IPA2	Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance
NA	National agency of the Erasmus+ Programme
National agency	National agency of the Erasmus+ Programme
Parliament	European Parliament
PI	Partnership Instrument
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TEU	Treaty on the European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union

1. Education and training in the EU's social inclusion policy

The focus of the Erasmus+ programme on participants with special needs or fewer opportunities derives from the EU's values and the role of education and training in EU social inclusion policy. One of the general objectives of the programme, as set out in Article 4 of the Erasmus+ Regulation,[3] is the promotion of European values in accordance with Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU).[4]

The European Union supports its most vulnerable citizens with a policy aimed at fighting poverty, social exclusion and discrimination. The EU's values and principles derive from the TEU, particularly its Articles 2 and 3. The EU's social inclusion policy is established in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU),[5] in particular, its Articles 19, 145-150 and 151-161.[6]

The European Union underlines that 'the fight against poverty and social exclusion is one of the key commitments of the European Union and its Member States',[7] and that is why many policies and actions have been undertaken to meet this objective.

For some, the year 2010 was a turning point in fighting poverty, social exclusion and discrimination in the EU. In 2010, the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth paid special attention to this challenge, by establishing a target 'to lift at least 20 million people out of poverty and social exclusion and to increase employment of the population aged 20-64 to 75 %'. The Europe 2020 strategy was followed by flagship initiatives, including the Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion and the Agenda for New Skills and Jobs.[8] The year 2010 was also designated as the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion,[9] with the aim of increasing public awareness of the situation, promoting a more cohesive society, and renewing the political commitment of the EU and its Member States.

The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR),[10] also called the 'social pillar', adopted in November 2017 during the Gothenburg Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth, set out 20 principals with the aim to better deliver on rights for citizens.

The first principle of the EPSR is dedicated to education, training and life-long learning, and states that 'Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market'.

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[3] Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing 'Erasmus+': the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport and repealing Decisions No 1719/2006/EC, No 1720/2006/EC and No 1298/2008/EC, OJ L 347, 20.12.2013 (no longer in force).

[4] The Treaty on European Union (TEU).

[5] Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

[6] The fight against poverty, social exclusion and discrimination, Fact Sheets on the European Union, European Parliament.

[7] Decision No 1098/2008/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2008 on the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (2010), OJ L 298, 7.11.2008.

[8] Social protection & social inclusion, European Commission website.

[9] Decision No 1098/2008/EC, op. cit.

[10] European Pillar of Social Rights booklet, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 principles, European Commission websites.

In December 2020, the European Parliament stressed in one of its resolutions[11] that the transition in the EU can only be achieved with appropriate support for, among other things, education.

In January 2021, the Commission published a communication on A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions,[12] which paves the way to an EPSR action plan, which was then to be published in early 2021. The communication underlined that 'The European Pillar of Social Rights is the European answer to the ... fundamental ambitions. It is our social strategy to make sure that the transitions of climate neutrality, digitalisation and demographic change are socially fair and just'.

With regard to empowering people through quality education, training and skills, the document underlined that 'skills are key for the future' and 'education and training are key to skills. The document also pointed out that 'half of the current workforce will need to update their skills within the next five years' while 'only 1 adult in 10 engages in any training in any given month'. The document also stressed 'the lack of sufficient ICT skills' when '1 million vacancies for ICT specialists are holding back investments in the digital transformation'.

The document also highlighted that the Erasmus+ programme would 'continue to support and strengthen education, training, youth and sport in Europe, with a strongly reinforced budget for the period 2021-2027', and that the programme would be made 'more easily accessible for young people with fewer opportunities, thereby making it more inclusive'.

The EPSR action plan was published in March 2021,[13] and it established three overall targets to be achieved by 2030:

1 At least 78 % of people aged 20 to 64 should be in employment;
2 At least 60 % of all adults should participate in training every year;
3 The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million, including at least 5 million children.

With regard to the Erasmus+ programme, the EPSR action plan underlined that the programme 'with a dedicated budget of more than EUR 26 billion, will contribute to skills development and investments in education and training systems, including projects such as European Universities and Centres of Vocational Excellence'.

In May 2021, a joint Porto Social Commitment was signed, engaging partners to achieve the three above-mentioned targets of the EPSR action plan.[14] The partners also underlined that unemployment and inequalities had increased due to the pandemic, and that is why 'it is important to channel resources where they are most needed to strengthen our economies and to focus our policy efforts on equal opportunities, access to quality services, quality job creation, entrepreneurship, up- and reskilling and reducing poverty and exclusion'. In June 2021, the Council welcomed the EU headline targets of the EPSR action plan, in line with the Porto Declaration.[15]

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[11] European Parliament resolution of 17 December 2020 on a strong social Europe for Just Transitions, European Parliament (2020/2084(INI)).

[12] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, A Strong Social Europe For Just Transitions, COM(2020) 14 final.

[13] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (COM(2021) 102 final), and the European Commission website.

[14] Porto Social Summit: all partners commit to 2030 social targets, European Commission website, and for further reading: Milotaj N., European Pillar of Social Rights Gothenburg, Porto and beyond, Briefing EPRS, European Parliament, May 2021.

[15] Conclusions of the European Council meeting (24 and 25 June 2021), European Council, 2021.

The EU social inclusion policy is also implemented through the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs), which are an 'intrinsic' part of the Commission's work programme. That is why the SDGs are integrated into all Commission proposals, policies and strategies.[16] The Parliament, in its resolution of 17 December 2020[17], also pointed out that it '[b]elieves that this recovery period must be the time for reforms fully committed to the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ...'.

In July 2020, the Commission presented the European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (to be achieved by 2025),[18] which aims to help individuals and businesses develop more and better skills and to put them to use, among others, by ensuring social fairness and putting into practice the first principle of the EPSR, on education training and lifelong learning for everybody. The investments in skills will be supported, according to the agenda, with EU funds, among them the Erasmus+ programme.[19]

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[16]   EU holistic approach to sustainable development, European Commission website.

[17]   European Parliament resolution of 17 December 2020 on a strong social Europe for Just Transitions, op. cit.

[18]   European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, European Commission website.

[19]   European Skills Agenda, European Commission website and Erasmus, the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport. Legislative Train, European Parliament.

2. Introduction to the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020)

2.1. Erasmus+ programme short history

The Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020)[20] is a successor to the Lifelong Learning programme 2007-2013,[21] which further gathered together, under one umbrella programme, separate programmes in the field of education, training and sport implemented in the previous periods, namely;[22]

> the Lifelong Learning programme:
>> *Erasmus* for higher education,
>> *Leonardo da Vinci* for vocational education and training,
>> *Comenius* for school education,
>> *Grundtvig* for adult learning,
>> *Jean Monnet* for promoting European integration;
> five international cooperation programmes: *Erasmus Mundus*, *Tempus*, *Alfa*, *Edulink*, bilateral cooperation programmes in the field of higher education (with Canada, the United States, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea);
> the *Youth in Action* programme.

The programme also brought sport and the Jean Monnet actions under the same umbrella.

The Erasmus+ programme took its name from the most recognised element of the package – the Erasmus programme, established in 1987 'as an exchange programme for higher education students'.[23] According to the European Commission, 'over the past 30 years, the programme has given 9 million people the chance to study, train, volunteer or gain professional experience abroad'.[24]

The names of the previous programmes (e.g. Erasmus, Comenius, Grundtvig, Leonardo da Vinci, Erasmus Mundus) are still mentioned in the Regulation establishing the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020, but are no longer mentioned in the regulation establishing the Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027.[25]

Figure 1 – Structure of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020), and previous programmes
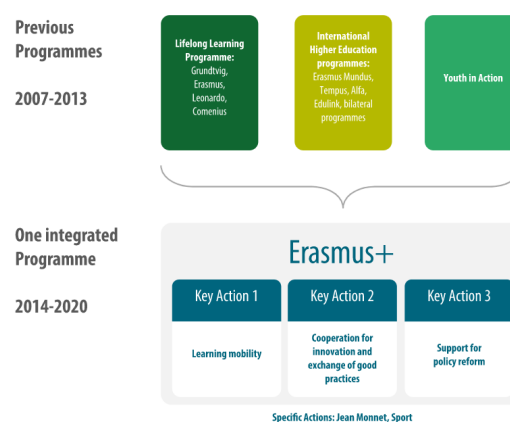
Source: Mobility under Erasmus+: European Court of Auditors.

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20   Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing 'Erasmus+': the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport and repealing Decisions No 1719/2006/EC, No 1720/2006/EC and No 1298/2008/EC, OJ L 347, 20.12.2013 (no longer in force).

21   Decision No 1720/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 November 2006 establishing an action programme in the field of lifelong learning, OJ L 327, 24.11.2006 (no longer in force).

22   Zygierewicz A.: The Erasmus+ Programme (Regulation EU No. 1288/2013). European Implementation Assessment, EPRS, European Parliament, 2016.

23   From Erasmus to Erasmus+: a story of 30 years, European Commission website, Post of 26 January 2017.

24   ibid.

25   Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013, OJ L 189, 28.5.2021, pp. 1–33.

Figure 2 – Main type of actions per Erasmus+ key actions

Learning mobility of individuals (KA1)	Cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practices (KA2)	Support for policy reform (KA3)
- Mobility of learners and practitioners - Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees - Student Loan Guarantee Facility	- Strategic Partnerships - IT support platforms - Knowledge Alliances (HE) - Sector Skills Alliances (VET) - Capacity Building (HE and Youth)	- Open method of Coordination (OMC) - Prospective initiatives - EU transparency and recognition tools - Dissemination & exploitation - Policy dialogue with stakeholders, third countries and international organisations

Source: Mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020), European Commission, p. 10.

2.2. Erasmus+ programme structure

The Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020) was established by Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 for a period starting on 1 January 2014 and ending on 31 December 2020.[26] The regulation is no longer in force, having been repealed by Regulation (EU) 2021/817 establishing the Erasmus+ programme for the period from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2027.[27] Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 established an Erasmus+ programme in the field of education, training, youth and sport, which covered the following fields (Article 1.3):

> education and training at all levels, in a lifelong learning perspective, including school education (Comenius), higher education (Erasmus), international higher education (Erasmus Mundus), vocational education and training (Leonardo da Vinci) and adult learning (Grundtvig);
> youth (Youth in Action), particularly in the context of non-formal and informal learning;
> sport, in particular grassroots sport.

Additionally, the Erasmus+ programme supported Jean Monnet actions.

The programme also included a strong international dimension aimed at supporting the EU's external actions (in particular the EU neighbourhood, enlargement and development objectives), including through cooperation, focused on higher education and youth, between the EU and its partner countries. Financing for those actions was available from: the Partnership Instrument (PI); the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI); the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA2); the European Neighbourhood Instrument (ENI); and the European Development Fund (EDF).[28]

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[26] Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing 'Erasmus+': the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport and repealing Decisions No 1719/2006/EC, No 1720/2006/EC and No 1298/2008/EC, OJ L 347, 20.12.2013 (no longer in force).

[27] Regulation (EU) 2021/817 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 establishing Erasmus+: the Union Programme for education and training, youth and sport and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013, PE/32/2021/INIT, OJ L 189, 28.5.2021 (in force).

[28] 2020 annual work programme "Erasmus+": the Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, C(2019)5823 of 7 August 2019.

The programme pursued its objectives through the following types of actions (Article 6):

> ❯ learning mobility of individuals (key action 1, KA1);
> ❯ cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices (key action 2, KA2);
> ❯ support for policy reform (key action 3, KA3).

2.3. Erasmus+ programme budget

The budget of the programme for 2014-2020 was set at €14.7 billion (Article 18 of the regulation), which was an increase by 40 % in comparison to the previous 2007-2014 period, when the Lifelong Learning programme was implemented. Additionally, €1.68 billion was provided through the external action budget (see above) to enable cooperation with partner countries.[29]

The programme budget was divided by the regulation as follows (see also Figure 3):[30]

> ❯ 77.5 % to education and training, from which the following minimum allocations should be assigned:
>> ❯ 43 % to higher education, representing 33.3 % of the total budget;
>> ❯ 22 % to vocational education and training, representing 17 % of the total budget;
>> ❯ 15 % to school education, representing 11.6 % of the total budget;
>> ❯ 5 % to adult learning, representing 3.9 % of the total budget;
> ❯ 10 % to youth;
> ❯ 3.5 % to the Student Loan Guarantee Facility;
> ❯ 1.9 % to Jean Monnet actions;
> ❯ 1.8 % to sport;
> ❯ 3.4 % as operating grants to national agencies;
> ❯ 1.9 % to cover administrative expenditure.

Figure 3 – Erasmus+ 2014-2020 budget division by sector

Source: Erasmus+ 2014-2020 budget (€14.7 m); breakdown of the education and training budget by sector, EPRS, post of 5 September 2019.

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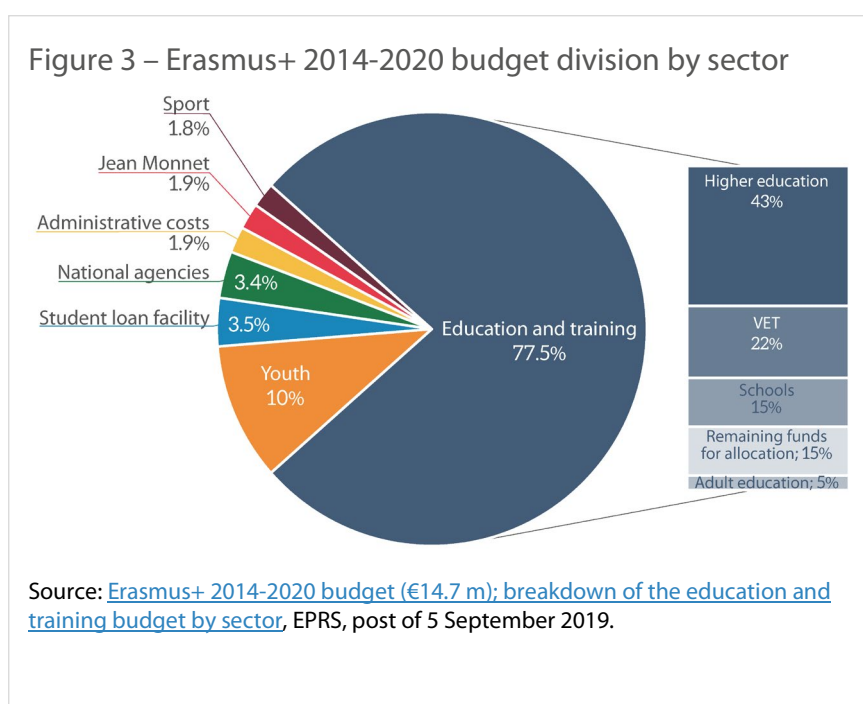
[29] List of partner countries of the Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020, European Commission website.

[30] See also: Mazur S., Chircop D., Erasmus+. How the EU budget is spent, Briefing, EPRS, European Parliament, November 2016.

The budget is divided by the years of the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme in an ascending mode (see Figure 4).

2.4. Erasmus+ programme implementation

According to Article 26 of the regulation, the programme is implemented by the Commission at the EU level, and by the national agencies (NAs) at the national level in the Erasmus+ programme countries.[31]

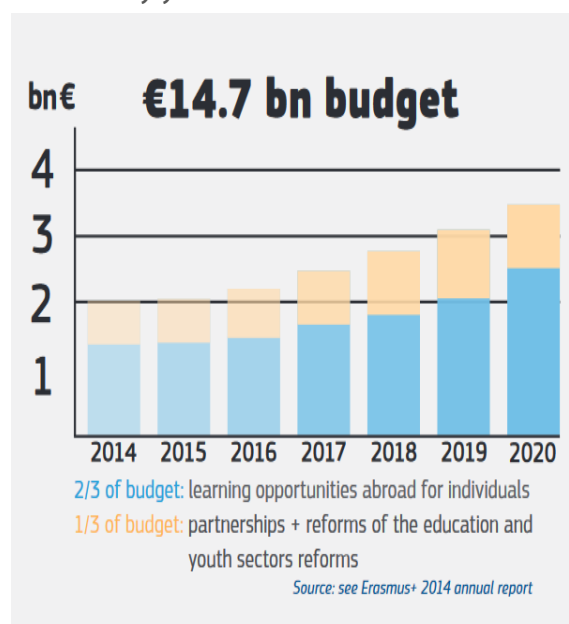At the European level, the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) was responsible for the implementation of the centralised actions accomplished under the programme, which accounted for a small share of the total budget. The budget of the programme is divided amongst the actions as follows: with approximately 82 % spent through decentralised actions and 18 % spent through centralised actions.[32]

The centralised actions were:[33] Joint Master Degrees, large-scale European Voluntary Service under KA1, Knowledge Alliances and Sector Skills Alliances under KA2, most of the KA3 actions, Jean Monnet activities and sport actions.

Figure 4 – Erasmus+ 2014-2020 budget division by years

bn€   **€14.7 bn budget**

2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020

2/3 of budget: learning opportunities abroad for individuals
1/3 of budget: partnerships + reforms of the education and youth sectors reforms

Source: see Erasmus+ 2014 annual report

At the Member State level, the national authorities established national agencies. If there was more than one national agency established in the country (as in the case of Belgium or Germany), the Member State was responsible for establishing 'an appropriate mechanism for the coordinated management of the implementation of the Programme at national level ...'. In 2018, there were 57 NAs appointed and supervised by the national authorities in 33 of the countries participating in the programme.

The aim of decentralising the larger share of the Erasmus+ 2014-2020 budget via national agencies was 'to bring the programme as close as possible to its beneficiaries and to adapt to the diversity of national education, training and youth systems'.[34]

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[31] Programme countries of the Erasmus+ 2014-2020 were the EU Member States, and six non-EU countries: Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Turkey.

[32] 2014 annual work programme for the implementation of "Erasmus+", the Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, C(2013)8193 of 27 November 2013.

[33] Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, Mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020) (COM(2018) 50 final) and Commission Staff Working Document Mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020) (SWD(2018) 40 final).

[34] ibid.

3. Outlines of the external studies

Besides the opening analysis, prepared in-house, this EIA includes two separate but complementary studies that seek to deepen knowledge about the implementation of the inclusion measures within the Erasmus + programme (2014-2020), with a focus on people with special needs and fewer opportunities:

> the first study, written by Prof. Maurice de Greef, looks at the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7 of Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013) (referred to as 'De Greef 2021' hereafter),

> the second study, written by Prof. Silvia Florea, explores the contribution of the Erasmus+ Youth Inclusion and Diversity Strategy (IDS) to the inclusion of young people and the way this document was reflected in the approach taken by the Erasmus national agencies (NAs) (referred to as 'Florea 2021' hereafter).

Outline of the study on Inclusion measures within Erasmus + Programme 2014 – 2020 with respect to learning mobility of individuals

The study on inclusion measures is based on a desk-review of existing literature and policy documents related to the learning process and mobility of people with special needs and fewer opportunities[35] and a data collection exercise (survey and interviews) that included a significant number of Erasmus+ national agencies (53 agencies from 35 countries were invited to contribute to the survey; 24 agencies from 19 countries participated in the survey and six agencies gave an interview[36]) to collect new information and to complete existing knowledge on the topic.

The question concerning the learning mobility of people with special needs or fewer opportunities was not only addressed in relation to the Erasmus+ programme but also integrated into a broader analysis that took into account the complementarity of macro-level policy-making and meso-level educational infrastructures as an approach to national and European initiatives and actions in the education and training field. The analysis also looked at various theoretical perspectives on the learning mobility of disadvantaged learners. This methodological approach was complemented by data collected on the ground (via a survey and several interviews) in direct relation with the application of Article 23(2) of Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013, and a number of international case studies, to identify success factors within the Erasmus+ programme and beyond. These data and case studies can be used in the future to support the inclusion of people with special needs and fewer opportunities in education and training programmes even better. This broad approach sought to provide policymakers with an enlarged and comprehensive view of the variety and complexity of the elements to be considered when dealing with the learning mobility of disadvantaged learners, starting with the very definition of people with special needs and fewer opportunities. The study also looked at the data provided by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training's (CEDEFOP) 'IVET Mobility Scoreboard' for elements related to the stimulation of learning mobility of people with special needs or fewer opportunities. It appeared that an important number of European countries scored rather low as regards the setting-up of policies focussing on mobility of disadvantaged learners during general or vocational education and training, and the Erasmus+ programme could be an opportunity in this sense.

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[35] In the learning process, people with special needs and fewer opportunities are also called 'disadvantaged learners'.

[36] Two agencies took part in both the survey and the interview.

Three main categories of findings emerged from the survey, relating to:

> definition and interpretation concerning the group of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities;
> number of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities who participated in Erasmus+ projects;
> barriers that prevent learners with special needs and fewer opportunities from taking part in international projects within the Erasmus+ programme.

As regards the *definition and interpretation concerning the group of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities*, the answers to the survey revealed that most of the national agencies used the categories proposed by the programme guide of the Erasmus+ programme. A small number of agencies use definitions based on national legislations or give priority to specific categories, because of problems with these learners. Overall, it can be said that the national agencies 'strive for a broad definition and interpretation' (De Greef 2021, p. 21) concerning the learners with special needs and fewer opportunities. For some agencies, including new categories would be beneficial (the age category (older people) category, for instance), while some others also take into consideration in their work other approaches/definitions, used at EU and international levels (such as the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Strategy on Disability post-2020, and the World Bank Disability Inclusion and Accountability Framework).

Concerning *the number of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities who participated in Erasmus+ projects*, it appeared from the survey that national agencies did reach learners with special needs and fewer opportunities, but the differences between countries were rather significant. On average, they counted for 13 237 learners per country (across 21 national agencies in 19 countries), out of a total of 277 997 learners with special needs and fewer opportunities involved in Erasmus+ projects. The average share of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities is 17 % of the overall number of learners reached, once again with important differences between countries. An important issue, which is worth mentioning in this context, is the difficulty in accessing and monitoring data regarding learners with special needs and fewer opportunities. The national agencies have expressed interest in improving this aspect, some of them are already collecting additional data using a separate survey on the profiles of the beneficiaries involved in the projects (France) or elaborating additional statistics (Sweden).

With regard to *the barriers that prevented learners with special needs and fewer opportunities from taking part in international projects within the Erasmus+ Programme*, the study revealed a number of best practices in reaching out to learners with special needs and fewer opportunities, the most effective being the cooperation with specific stakeholders (e.g. youth centres and schools). However, the study also pointed out that several barriers persisted. Among them, five seemed to be common to all participating national agencies: language barriers, financial barriers, psychological barriers, administrative barriers and unfamiliarity with the programme.

The study also made six main recommendations to policy-makers:

> maintain the broad definition of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities and add an additional focus on age;
> stimulate national policy-making to implement the results of the projects that focus on learners with special needs or fewer opportunities in respect of the Erasmus+ programme in the different countries.
> stimulate international projects relating to KA1, KA2 and KA3 to focus on the different sub-groups of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities;
> develop an instrument to monitor if learners with special needs or fewer opportunities are being reached;

> discuss and implement solutions to remove the different barriers facing learners with special needs or fewer opportunities to enable them to join the mobility projects of the Erasmus+ Programme;

> develop a community of practice among the Erasmus+ national agencies concerning public relations, improving the participation of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities.

At the same time, the study pleaded for creating more synergies and complementarities with other international guidelines, such as UNESCO's priorities and policies and the 17 UN sustainable development goals of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This could contribute to the development of 'a framework of policy-making for education' with regard to learners with special needs and fewer opportunities.

Outline of the study on Inclusion measures within the Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020: the added value of the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth

The study targeted young people with special needs or fewer opportunities by assessing the benefits of the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy in the context of the Erasmus+ programme. In this respect, the study looked at a number of obstacles faced by young people with special needs or fewer opportunities, with particular attention to barriers arising from the programme's management and implementation. As explained in the study, one of the focuses in the youth context is to overcome different types of obstacles by providing support at a systemic level. At the same time, the study explored a number of actions, mechanisms, and initiatives and resources used by the Erasmus+ programme to address the inclusion and diversity priorities during this period and meant to create cooperation and synergies between different categories of stakeholders for the inclusion of youth with special needs or fewer opportunities.

The study built on two main sources:

> existing EU and national documents with relevance for youth;

> fresh data collected on the ground through a survey addressed to the Erasmus+ national agencies and one comprehensive interview with the SALTO Inclusion and Diversity Resource Centre (a support structure that provides inclusion and diversity resources, such as training and publications, on international youth work with young people with fewer opportunities).

In 2014, the Erasmus+ Youth Inclusion and Diversity Strategy (IDS) was launched to strengthen the social inclusion approach which had already been introduced by the previous Inclusion Strategy of the Youth in Action programme,[37] and to allow the Erasmus+ programme to 'become a lever for positive change in the field of youth for disadvantaged groups in society'. The IDS aims at increasing the number and quality of inclusion and diversity projects and in this way contributing to a number of identified needs. These range from creating a common understanding of 'those who may be considered as young people with fewer opportunities' to consolidating commitment to inclusion and diversity of different actors and reducing obstacles, to increasing intercultural and social skills, and consolidating the recognition of the experience and skills gained by young people with fewer opportunities in Erasmus+ and by the youth workers working with them. The IDS was consolidated at national level by national inclusion strategies, based on specific country needs. Seven out of twenty national agencies participating in the survey developed or updated their own national inclusion strategies integrating inclusion and diversity in their own national priorities and interests. The national strategies serve 'as a strategic approach to inclusion that contributes to European objectives, while taking national, regional and local specificities into account' (Florea 2021).

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[37] For additional information, see: https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-1294/InclusionStrategyYiA.pdf and https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/tools/documents/programme-guide-2008_en.pdf.

Both the desk-research and the primary data collection (the survey and the interview) indicated increased concern and support for the inclusion of young people with special needs or fewer opportunities. For instance, 85 % of participating NAs (17 out of 20) appointed an inclusion officer, whose role is 'to assist their NAs in mainstreaming inclusion and diversity as well as in identifying target groups of disadvantaged, at-risk and vulnerable young participants' (Florea 2021). As indicated by the survey responses, a variety of actions contributed to the achievement of the supportive and proactive approach of national agencies, such as: mapping new groups/organisations and conducting needs assessments (72 %), by developing capacity-building partnerships (96 %), by scoping available resources and tools and developing new ones (62 %), by assessing impact and monitoring tested approaches (83 %) (Florea 2021). The efforts of national agencies were supplemented by the activities developed by the SALTO Inclusion and Diversity Resource Centre in various forms (inter alia: training for youth workers, awareness-raising events and publications, and stakeholder gatherings). Moreover, joint actions of national agencies and SALTO Resources Centres led to the creation of specific cooperative tools such as the Strategic Partnership on Inclusion, established by 16 national agencies[38] and two SALTO Centres.[39] The Partnership aims at increasing the participation of young people with fewer opportunities by reaching out and involving four target groups that are under-represented in Erasmus+ in the different countries.

According to the results of the survey carried out within this research project, the national agencies facilitated the participation of over 176 000 people with special needs or fewer opportunities in the Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020.

As a conclusion, the evaluation showed that the ID Strategy was 'instrumental in providing a conceptual understanding of inclusion and diversity having served as a key factor both in improving inclusion in youth work and in developing a common operational framework for initiatives, approaches and activities' (Florea 2021). At the same time, the national agencies played 'a critical role in developing and implementing information materials, outreach efforts, and information platforms, as well as in regularly identifying and contacting youth organisations working in fields related to inclusion and diversity' (Florea 2021, p. 38). While implementing the inclusion approach of people with special needs or fewer opportunities put forward by the Erasmus+ Regulation and the ID Strategy, the national agencies actively cooperated with SALTO (and especially SALTO Inclusion and Diversity) and the European Solidarity Corps (the EU initiative offering young people opportunities to volunteer or work in projects in their own country or abroad while supporting communities and people around Europe).

The overall conclusion, based on the findings and recommendations of the two external studies and the analysis of other relevant existing documents, is that the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020 has managed to strengthen both the learning mobility of individuals and the participation of young people with special needs or fewer opportunities in Erasmus+ projects and to develop inclusion-related support instruments for Erasmus+ applicants and beneficiaries. However, the current assessment, together with other evaluations and research indicate a need for further expansion of access and inclusiveness of these categories in the future.

Through the information and analysis provided, this EIA tried to shed light on new elements on and to broaden knowledge about the inclusion of people with special needs or fewer opportunities, in a context where, as indicated by the national agencies, monitoring and evaluation are proving difficult.

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[38] Austria, Czechia, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Finland, Cyprus

[39] SALTO Inclusion and Diversity and SALTO South East Europe.

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Inclusion measures within the Erasmus + programme 2014-2020 with respect to learning mobility of individuals

This study evaluates Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7). It focuses on the promotion of social inclusion and participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities. Besides a systematic review of current policies, evaluations and scientific studies, focussing on the involvement of people with special needs or fewer opportunities in learning mobility, an international case study was analysed and an online survey was conducted covering 28 Erasmus+ national agencies in 24 European countries. Based on the results of this mixed-method study, a number of recommendations have been made to ensure the active involvement of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities in the Erasmus+ Programme.

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Executive summary

One of the goals of the Erasmus+ Regulation[1] with regard to the learning mobility of individuals, focuses on tackling the societal challenge of social inequality through lack of access to and uptake of education. It pursues the role of connector between policies/initiatives on the one hand and participants with disadvantaged backgrounds and fewer opportunities on the other. This has been created to promote social inclusion and participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities.

This study evaluates Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7). It focuses on the promotion of social inclusion and participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities. It draws on an evidence-based analysis of policy-making and initiatives in the field of education on the macro level and the provision of educational services on the meso level. In addition, it carried out a systematic review of current policies, evaluations and scientific studies, focussing on the involvement of people with special needs or fewer opportunities in learning mobility. It was apparent, that field research was also necessary. An international case study was analysed and an online survey and interviews were conducted covering 28 Erasmus+ national agencies in 24 European countries.

First, according to the results of the online survey and interviews, most of the Erasmus+ national agencies and realised projects seem to strive for a broad definition and interpretation concerning the group of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. The categories of the Programme Guide of the Erasmus+ Programme seem to be used by most of the agencies.

Second, according to the results of the policy review, most countries (28 EU + Norway and Iceland), score poorly concerning policy-making for learners with special needs and fewer opportunities, in the support of their mobility during the general or vocational education and training carried out in the initial education system.

Third, the analysis of topics in the KA1, KA2 and KA3[2] projects revealed that a variety of groups of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities have been reached. The percentage per project and per sub-group varies significantly from 0.8% to 11.1%. The relative number of involved learners with special needs or fewer opportunities among the Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) actions seems to be higher and ranges from 26% to 46%.

Fourth, according to the analysis of the online survey and interviews, the Erasmus+ national agencies have reached 277.997 learners with special needs and fewer opportunities, which totals 17% of the overall number of learners but this varies noticeably between countries. Additionally it became clear, in several countries, it is very difficult to accurately monitor the number of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities being reached.

Fifth, some of the Erasmus+ national agencies seem to have strong strategies in reaching out to learners with special needs and fewer opportunities. But again this differs between countries.

Sixth, there are several barriers, which prevent learners with special needs and fewer opportunities from taking part in the international projects of the Erasmus+ Programme. Although there appear

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[1] Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 of the European Parliament and of the council of 11 December 2013 establishing 'Erasmus+': the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport and repealing Decisions No 1719/2006/EC, No 1720/2006/EC and No 1298/2008/EC

[2] KA1 includes projects of Key Action 1: Learning mobility of individuals, KA2 includes projects of Key Action 2: Cooperation among organisations and institutions and KA3 includes projects of Key Action 3: Support to policy development and cooperation

to be differences between the agencies and the countries, five barriers seem to be common. These are:

1   Language barriers
2   Financial barriers
3   Psychological barriers
4   Administrative barriers
5   Unfamiliarity with the programme

Finally, in order to stimulate the involvement and success of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities, potential education projects have to take different conditions into account to be attractive, namely:

> The foundation: The context of the daily life circumstances.
> The coach: The importance of the intensive personal face-to-face guidance with reference to disabilities.
> The participant: The setting of goals and the increase in self-direction.
> Transfer: The promotion of internalisation of what is learned into daily life.

Based on the results of this mixed-method study, six recommendations can be made to ensure the active involvement of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities in the Erasmus+ Programme:

> Recommendation 1: Maintain the broad definition of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities and add an additional focus on age
> Recommendation 2: Stimulate national policy-making concerning learning for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities
> Recommendation 3: Stimulate international projects KA1, KA2 and KA3 to focus on the different sub-groups of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities
> Recommendation 4: Develop an instrument to monitor if learners with special needs or fewer opportunities are being reached
> Recommendation 5: Discuss and implement solutions to the different barriers for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities to enable them to join the international projects of the Erasmus+ Programme
> Recommendation 6: Develop a Community of Practice among the Erasmus+ national agencies concerning PR, good practices and stimulation in respect of the involvement of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities

One of the recommendations from the field and desk research is to stimulate national policy-making concerning learning for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. In order to realise this on an international and national level, possible guidelines have to be provided. Some of the most important guidelines are UNESCO's priorities and policies and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations. These can support the development of a framework of policy-making for the education of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities.

The third recommendation based on the field and desk research, is to stimulate international projects KA1, KA2 and KA3 to focus on the different sub-groups of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. To achieve this, as a result of the field research, the four elements mentioned above (foundation, coach, participant and transfer) should be considered. An analysis of international case studies has been conducted to show how countries all over the world develop new initiatives for an infrastructure of education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. This can be used as an inspiration for each country, and its schools and learning centres, to increase learning mobility for these learners.

Table of contents

Table of figures

Table of tables

Table of frequently used abbreviations and acronyms

CBHE: Capacity Building in Higher Education

CEDEFOP: European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

EACEA: European Commission and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency

EAEA: European Association for the Education of Adults

EFA: Education for All

GRALE: Global Report on Adult Learning and Education

ICAE: International Council for Adult Education

ICT: Information & Communications Technology

IVET: Initial Vocational Education and Training

KA1: Key Action 1: Learning mobility of individuals

KA2: Key Action 2: Cooperation among organisations and institutions

KA3: Key Action 3: Support to policy development and cooperation

LGBTI: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex

NEET: Not in Education, Employment or Training

OECD: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

USP: Unique Selling Point

1. Introduction and research objectives

The access to the Erasmus+ Programme is referred to in Article 23 of Erasmus+ Regulation, which pays special attention, in its second point, to the social inclusion and the participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities.

This study evaluates Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7). It focuses on the promotion of social inclusion and participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities. It draws on an evidence-based analysis of policy-making and initiatives in the field of education on the macro level and the provision of educational services on the meso level.

1.1. Background

One of the goals of the Erasmus+ Regulation[3] with regard to the learning mobility of individuals focuses on tackling the societal challenge of social inequality through lack of access to and uptake of education. This is achieved by assuming the role of connector between policies/initiatives on the one hand and participants with disadvantaged backgrounds and fewer opportunities on the other. The aim is to promote social inclusion and participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities.

This study examines what is and is not working, the reasons for this and what can be improved to maximise social inclusion and participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities. It focuses on the concept of learner mobilisation strategies, i.e. the implementation of the Erasmus+ Regulation regarding the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7) in participating countries. The study considers the macro level (policy making) and the meso level (educational infrastructure) and its overall objective is to:

Evaluate Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7), focussing on promotion of social inclusion and participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities using an evidence-based analysis of policy-making and initiatives in the field of education on a macro level in addition to the provision of educational services on a meso level.

The rationale behind the study is to underline the importance of inclusion of people with special needs or fewer opportunities. By increasing the learning mobility, these citizens have the possibility to join education. As a result, education can increase the rate of social inclusion of people with special needs or fewer opportunities. Recent studies show the impact of education on social inclusion (De Greef et al., 2012). When vulnerable adults join education, they are more able to manage things in daily life (a process of activation), they feel themselves more at ease (process of internalisation), are more able to do things in society (process of participation) and they meet more other people (process of connection). As Figure 1 shows, the learner himself or herself will experience functional and emotional rewards after learning partly in contact with the environment.

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[3]   Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 of the European Parliament and of the council of 11 December 2013 establishing 'Erasmus+': the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport and repealing Decisions No 1719/2006/EC, No 1720/2006/EC and No 1298/2008/EC

Figure 1: Model of social inclusion
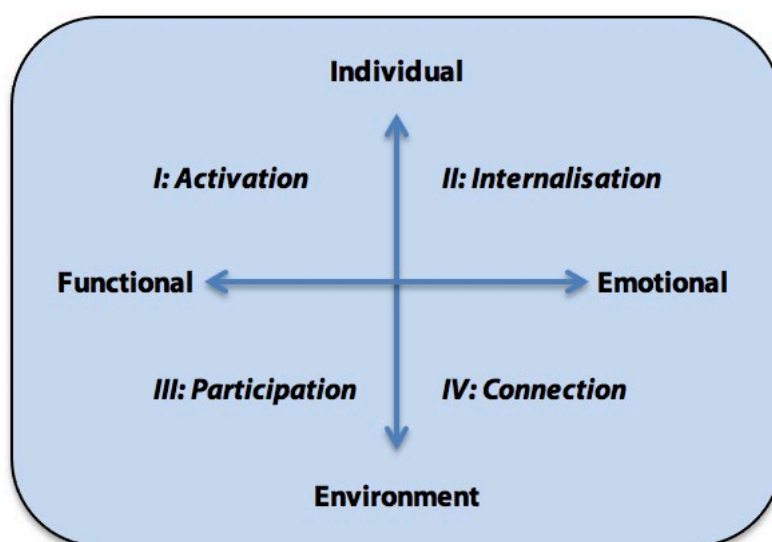
Source: De Greef, Verté en Segers, 2012

1.2. Research objectives

In order to achieve this overall objective, the study focuses on 4 specific research objectives (RO) as follows:

RO 1: To document and interpret the key enablers and barriers of successful implementation of Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to learning mobility of individuals (Article 7).

Many elements in the field of education can contribute to the inequality, and a comprehensive analysis is needed to define the key enablers of and barriers to successful implementation of Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation in respect of learning mobility of individuals (Article 7). An important question is which key elements on the macro and meso levels can enhance or block participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities. This includes educational difficulties, economic obstacles, cultural differences, health problems, social obstacles and geographical obstacles. An extensive systematic international desk research in addition to a policy review will reveal the key elements, that can influence participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities.

RO 2: To document and analyse the ways in which policies of relevance to participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities are implemented.

Each European country has its own policy, educational initiatives, possible cooperation mechanisms with other key figures in the social domain and local and regional boundaries and opportunities to enable participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities. In addition, cultural aspects of learning and the learners themselves should be taken into account. Therefore, the study includes a policy review to determine the key-drivers for the participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities both on the macro and meso levels and taking into account the differences between the European countries.

RO 3: To map and interpret macro level enablers and barriers to implementation of Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to learning mobility of individuals (Article 7).

The basic foundation of the implementation of Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to learning mobility of individuals (Article 7) is rooted in decisions on the macro level for each European country. Therefore, policies and specific initiatives in education and other relevant social fields have to be investigated to reveal which mechanisms have been successful. The study includes a survey that maps the critical factors on the macro level that can influence the learner mobilisation strategies and enhance participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities.

RO 4: To map and interpret enablers and barriers on the meso level and their relationship to mobilisation strategies with a specific focus on different providers and their services

Throughout Europe, the infrastructure of education varies significantly within each country. Considerations include national and regional policies, urban and rural settings and numerous stakeholders with a variety of targets and interests. Additionally, the mechanisms of formal and informal education and public and private funding vary and seem to influence the process of access and uptake of education. The study analyses, maps and interprets the elements and mechanisms on the meso level, that influence an efficient and effective process of participation for people with special needs or fewer opportunities facilitated by Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to learning mobility of individuals (Article 7).

As a result, these four objectives underline the interdependence of the different levels in realising education (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Interplay between macro, meso and micro level in education
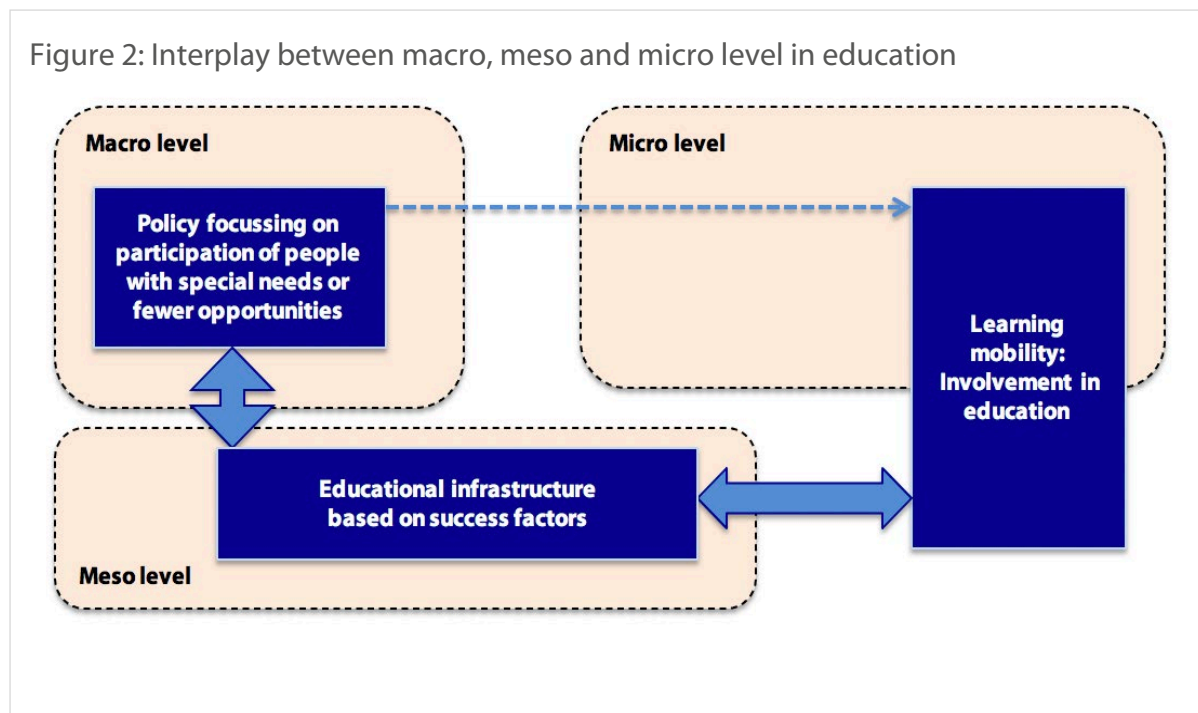
Source: the author

On macro level, policymaking focussing on participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities has to be realised. These policies influence the development of the educational infrastructure in schools, learning centres, etc. on the meso level. And finally the learning mobility of the learners on the micro level will increase due to the fact that can follow courses provided on the meso level.

2. Research methodology

To evaluate Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7) in respect of the social inclusion and participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities, a specific research methodology was used. In addition to a systematic review of current policies, evaluations and scientific studies, field research into mobility was necessary. As a result, the following research methodologies have been used:

1   Systematic policy and literature review and international case studies analysis
2   Online survey among stakeholders
3   Qualitative data collection based on the phenomenographic research design
4   International case studies analysis

2.1. Systematic policy and literature review

To reveal the key enablers and barriers to the participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities as facilitated by Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7) a policy review has been conducted. This policy review has been achieved by analysing the relevant documents of European partners and networks throughout Europe. These include: the policy documents of the European Commission and the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), the studies of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

A systematic desk research has been conducted in order to trace and describe possible success factors for learner mobilisation strategies and enhanced participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities. This resulted in a selection of unique international resources. The following databases have been used: ERIC (EBSCO), PiCarta, PsycARTICLES (EBSCO), PsycINFO (EBSCO), Sage Journals Online, ScienceDirect (Elsevier), SpringerLink, SSCI, Taylor and Francis Online, Web of Science and Wiley Online Library. Additionally, examples of studies, guidelines and handbooks in learner mobilisation strategies and enhancement of participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities have been consulted, e.g. CEDEFOP's study concerning the empowerment of adults through upskilling and reskilling pathways and the manual of the project implOED (coordinated by the European Association for the Education of Adults - EAEA) concerning the practice of outreach, empowerment and diversity for adult education).

2.2. Online survey among stakeholders

To get an overview of the status quo and the cultural influences on participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities facilitated by Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation and the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7) a cross-cultural mapping in cooperation with stakeholders in several European countries was carried out. As a result of the policy review, a survey was designed based on the framework of the participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities facilitated by Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to learning mobility of individuals (Article 7).

The survey was conducted among the Erasmus+ national agencies from diverse regions of Europe: Northern, Western, Southern and Eastern Europe. The survey was addressed to 53 national agencies from 35 countries. 24 national agencies from 19 countries took part in the survey. All participants answered questions to track and trace the implementation of Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to learning mobility of individuals (Article 7). After a brief standardized

instruction, each agency answered questions about key enablers and barriers based on the framework of the key enablers and barriers to the participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities facilitated by Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation regarding the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7). The aim of the survey was to discover differences between countries and also the intended standard. This information might allow for improvements in the implementation of Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation with regard to learning mobility of individuals (Article 7).

2.3. Qualitative data collection based on the phenomenographic research design

To reveal the possibilities or otherwise of the educational structure on a meso level an in-depth analysis appeared necessary. This complexity of the meso level is a result of the disparity of the education stakeholders and the different educational infrastructures in each European country. As a result, in addition to the online survey, six interviews were conducted based on the phenomenographic approach, to cross-check data and detail some aspects. According to Tan (2008) and Howitt and Cramer (2008) phenomenographic research is a preferred method, when a researcher aims to explore interpretations and experiences of meaning and practises of individuals concerning a complex phenomenon. Marton and Booth (1997) point out that by using phenomenography it is possible to reveal different ways of experiencing a phenomenon among participants. This method is based on a clinical interview that probes participants' perceptions of a phenomenon (Marton et al, 1997). Regarding the research questions of this study, we wanted to explore the experiences of education stakeholders in respect of the mobilisation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities, including educational difficulties, economic obstacles, cultural differences, health problems, social obstacles and geographical obstacles.

These education stakeholders were professionals of the Erasmus+ national agencies and were asked to reveal the possibilities or otherwise of mobilisation strategies for people with special needs or fewer opportunities, including the variety of offered and needed learning environments for learners. This provided an analysis on the meso level, of the enabling and blocking experienced with the mobilisation strategies for people with special needs or fewer opportunities.

Taking the guidelines of the phenomenographic approach in educational research into account, the interview technique refers to the guidance on the response of the interviewees and the encouragement to discuss the perceptions of the interviewees relating to the phenomenon (Booth, 1997). In this study, interviewees were asked to discuss their interpretations of the participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities facilitated by Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation in respect of the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7).

2.4. International case studies analysis

An international case studies analysis has been realized within this research project, in order to advice on a macro level (policy making) and meso level (educational infrastructure) what the possible changes should be in order to optimize the learning mobility for people with special needs or fewer opportunities. These case studies focused on realized good practices concerning education of people with special needs or fewer opportunities in other countries. In cooperation with partners of 5 international networks several good practices in 34 countries have been found. These networks are:

1 EBSN: European Basic Skills Network
2 EDAM: EDucation Against Marginalisation
3 ELINET: European Literacy Policy Network
4 GUTS: Generations Using Training for Social Inclusion in 2020
5 INFONET: European INFONET Adult Education Network

In addition, the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) looked for additional cases amongst her co-operating partners. Eventually several worthy practices were selected from different countries, who give an answer to the question what conditions make sure (that) different groups of adults among others, people with special needs and fewer opportunities or in other words disadvantaged learners join learning mobility (or education).

3. Definition of people with special needs or fewer opportunities

This evaluation focuses on the impact of the Erasmus+ programme on the people with special needs or fewer opportunities. For the purpose of this research, the broad definition of the European Commission (European Commission, 2014) was taken into account. The definition includes the following elements:

> Disabilities
> Health problems
> Educational difficulties
> Cultural differences
> Economic obstacles
> Social obstacles
> Geographical obstacles

This evaluation focuses on the impact of the Erasmus+ Programme on the people with special needs or fewer opportunities. Based on the 'Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy', the following definition of people with special needs and fewer opportunities will be applied for this study (European Commission, 2014, p. 7):

"The following situations often prevent (…) people from taking part in employment, formal and non-formal education, trans-national mobility, democratic process and society at large:

1. **Disability (i.e. participants with special needs):** young people with mental (intellectual, cognitive, learning), physical, sensory or other disabilities etc.
2. **Health problems:** young people with chronic health problems, severe illnesses or psychiatric conditions etc.
3. **Educational difficulties:** young people with learning difficulties, early school-leavers, lower qualified persons, young people with poor school performance etc.
4. **Cultural differences:** immigrants, refugees or descendants from immigrant or refugee families, young people belonging to a national or ethnic minority, young people with linguistic adaptation and cultural inclusion difficulties etc.
5. **Economic obstacles:** young people with a low standard of living, low income, dependence on the social welfare system, young people in long-term unemployment or poverty, young people who are homeless, in debt or with financial problems etc.
6. **Social obstacles:** young people facing discrimination because of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, etc., young people with limited social skills or anti-social or high-risk behaviours, young people in a precarious situation, (ex-)offenders, (ex-)drug or alcohol abusers, young and/or single parents, orphans etc.
7. **Geographical obstacles:** young people from remote or rural areas, young people living on small islands or in peripheral regions, young people from urban problem zones, young people from less serviced areas (limited public transport, poor facilities) etc."

During this study, all sub-groups of those with special needs or fewer opportunities were identified as disadvantaged learners. They had fewer opportunities to learn or take part in learning mobility, which refers to the main issue of this study.

4. Background characteristics of disadvantaged learners

In 2020, only 56% of the European population aged 16 to 74 had at least basic digital skills. In other words, almost half of the European population aged 16 to 74 did not have sufficient basic digital skills. Additionally, in 2020 among those aged 18 to 24, 9.9% left school early. Several studies have been conducted to understand the disadvantaged backgrounds of the learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. Opportunities in society for the low-skilled are negatively affected by three kinds of problems, to mention health, ageing and private situation. Besides, extra investment in learning mobility for three groups with special needs or fewer opportunities seems to be necessary, to mention: older people, people with mental disabilities and unemployed people who are ill.

Education appears to have a positive impact on people with special needs or fewer opportunities. It specifically seems to have a significant impact on the chances for a better labour market position. What do we know about the sub-groups of disadvantaged learners for whom the Erasmus+ Programme aims to increase their learning mobility? In 2020, only 56% of the European population aged 16 to 74 had at least basic digital skills[4] (Eurostat, 2021a). In other words, almost half of the European population aged 16 to 74 did not have sufficient basic digital skills. Additionally, in 2020 among those aged 18 to 24, 9.9% left school early (Eurostat, 2021b). These youngsters lack a basic qualification to find employment on the labour market. Low-skilled people without this basic qualification have a relatively vulnerable position on the labour market. According to the OECD (2018), it is important to use and improve the skills of all people, including low-skilled. However, learning is not the same for everyone. Fouarge et al. (2013) indicate that low-skilled employees are less involved in education and training. This is especially influenced by personal inclinations and other economical preferences (e.g., having spare time or a different future perspective). Edzes et al. (2015) support this indicating that low-skilled people prefer short-term goals, e.g., earning money.

Several studies have been conducted to understand the disadvantaged backgrounds of the learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. These studies explain the difference in personal circumstances (things affecting someone and which relate directly to them) of this group in comparison with citizens who joined secondary or higher education. A significant share of the disadvantaged learners seems to be low-skilled and unemployed. The challenges of these learners will probably increase due to increasing health problems (through ageing), the high standards at work and the more and more complex multi-problems in society (Veldheer et al., 2012; Woittiez et al., 2014). Opportunities in society for the low-skilled are negatively affected by three kinds of problems:

> *Health*: Low-skilled people frequently suffer from poor health conditions (Bruggink, 2009; De Hollander et al., 2006). More often they report moderate or bad health conditions compared to people with higher education, suffer from physical complaints and chronic diseases at a younger age, and have a shorter life expectancy.
> *Ageing:* In the *coming* years, the low-skilled working population will age more quickly than the highly skilled professional population. The cause of this tendency is the decrease in the amount of people under the age of 55 with a lower level of education. Considering that older people suffer from severe health complaints more often than younger people and the fact that those complaints occur at a relatively younger age concerning low-skilled people (Poos et al., 2014), it is to be expected that health differences between the low-skilled and high-skilled working population will increase

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4   The digital skills are one of the important basic skills in order to manage one's daily life especially due to the fact that a lot of services in daily life can (only) be provided by using digital skills.

in the future. For the low-skilled people it can be more difficult because they often have a more physically challenging job, so health complaints can become an obstruction sooner (Bijl et al., 2017).

> *Private situation:* Low-skilled people more often experience problems in their private situation. They are more frequently in arrears (Vroonhof et al., 2009), have problematic debts (Kerckhaert and De Ruig, 2013) or have a child with psycho-social problems (Zeijl et al., 2005). Relatively more of them are single parents (Coumans, 2008). The time and energy these problems demand, possibly hinders their participation in the labour market. Additionally, based on some studies, some increase in poverty amongst low-skilled people is to be expected (De Graaf-Zijl et al., 2015).

So extra investment in the learning mobility of people with special needs or fewer opportunities seems to be necessary to ensure their education and a sustainable place in society and the labour market. Apart from the personal motivation to learn, one should consider the personal situation of the disadvantaged learners and the possible hindrances like cognitive restrictions, health problems and personal problems.

4.1. Attention for specific groups: older people, people with mental disabilities and unemployed people who are ill

Low-skilled, particularly older people (above retirement age, which varies per country) do not participate significantly in education and training (Borghans et al., 2014). According to Jurgens and Buisman (2017) offering relevant tailored-made training activities that match the experiences and interests of older people is important. It is also important to consider groups of older people concerning their origin, socio-cultural background, and their psychological condition (Fisher, 1998). It additionally seems to be necessary to provide a safe learning environment (Jurgens and Buisman, 2017). When an older person would like to participate in education or training, together with several practical obstructions (e.g., costs and a lack of transport) a lack of self-confidence can be an obstruction (Peterson and Wendt, 1995).

The learning environment for people with a (slight) mental disability should be tailor-made. For example, studies make clear that their study-curriculum needs to match their personal situation (Gerber, 2012). Factors that may create success are a qualified teacher or trainer, the social support of the family, good quality training activities and materials, and the provision of guidance from a job-coach (De Greef; 2014; Gerber, 2012). During the learning process especially this group of learners must be supported in preparation for future challenges (e.g., while starting a new job) and get to work independently and autonomously (Gerber, 2012).

Other than older people and people with a (slight) mental disability, few studies have been conducted into training amongst unemployed people who are ill. It becomes clear that among others obstacles, like physical health restrictions and psychological health problems may be obstructive in progressing 'from job to job'. Learning can fulfill an essential role in this (Borghouts – Van de Pas et al., 2019). People's health also plays an important part during the learning process of these disadvantaged learners.

To sum up, extra investment in learning mobility for these three groups with special needs or fewer opportunities seems to be necessary.

5. Success factors of learning mobility of disadvantaged learners

> Question is what factors could possibly contribute to increasing the learning opportunities for people with special needs or fewer opportunities – the 'disadvantaged learners'. Four important influencing factors for the education of people with special needs and fewer opportunities can be identified based on the analysis of the desk research:
>
> ❯ The foundation: The context of the daily life circumstances.
> ❯ The coach: The importance of the intensive personal face-to-face guidance with reference to disabilities.
> ❯ The participant: The setting of goals and the increase in self-direction.
> ❯ Transfer: The promotion of internalisation of what is learned into daily life.

What factors could possibly contribute to increasing the learning opportunities for people with special needs or fewer opportunities – the 'disadvantaged learners'? The involvement in learning depends on the intentions of learning (Sanders, 2016). Employees without a basic qualification do not participate in education because, amongst other things, they do not have access, do not want to, do not know how, or do not dare to participate (Mosselman, 2006). It is therefore important to stimulate the intentions of learning, which is a challenge for policy makers and educators. Which factors of the learning environment could possibly influence the intentions of learning?

In addition to the contents of the learning environment itself (e.g., activities and materials) several studies refer to essential elements required during learning: the participant, the coach, and the possibilities to use in practice what has been learnt. The daily life circumstances and the direct environment of the participant also make a contribution. Four important influencing factors for the education of people with special needs and fewer opportunities can be identified:

❯ The foundation: The context of the daily life circumstances.
❯ The coach: The importance of the intensive personal face-to-face guidance with reference to disabilities.
❯ The participant: The setting of goals and the increase in self-direction.
❯ Transfer: The promotion of internalisation of what is learned into daily life.

This chapter focuses on the theoretical background and examples of best practice, to see how they might be beneficial in the context of the Erasmus+ programme.

5.1. The foundation: The context of the daily life circumstances

The daily life circumstances of individuals – family life, working life, psychological and physical health, financial situation, etc. – are one of the most significant elements during learning (Illiris 2002). During the learning process, three core issues need to be considered (Hoeve, 2012):

1   The learning process is focused on meaningful content. The participant needs to be able to own something, which is useful and directly applicable. According to Ryan and Deci (2000) learning will have to be meaningful and be useful to the participant.

2   The learning process is an emotional process. It is not only about gaining knowledge, but also about emotional development.

3   The learning process is a social process with interaction between the individual and the environment.

By looking at the daily life circumstances, one can discover factors, which can promote or hinder learning mobility. A personal perspective in the context of money or time can prevent someone

from participating in education (Künn – Nelen et al., 2018). According to Grace and Smith (2001), one will have to find a balance between the demands of education and the other demands of life (like family).

In addition, the personality and disposition of a participant can impact learning (Maliranta et al., 2010). For example, an individual's level of literacy and whether they can manage an assessment will impact the outcome (Grace and Smith, 2001).

It is important to identify prior learning competences. These indicate which skills the participant has and feels secure in and what they would prefer to develop. It is part of the personal situation. To stimulate the learning mobility, we need to know, which competences the participant already owns and could possibly develop further. When there is consideration given to the current skills of the participant, the motivation to participate in learning mobility will be improved.

5.2. The coach: The importance of intensive personal face-to-face guidance with reference to disabilities

Despite digitalization and the necessity to arrange things independently online, it becomes clear that the role of the 'coach' is of great importance for a constructive learning process. Research by De Greef and Bohnenn (2011) shows that, overall, for the low-skilled participants, the 'coach' does play an important part in the learning process. They are an important back-up for the participant to get started in learning mobility. Ryan and Deci (2000) indicate the need for attention to the personal well-being of the participant. Besides a positive relationship with people in the direct surroundings and with other participants, the learning process is also influenced by a positive relationship with the teacher. This guide of the learning process can have different names, like teacher (Nijhuis et al., 2005), mentor (Ratio and Hall, 1999), supervisor (Holton et al., 2003), consultant (Van Lakerveld et al., 2000), guide (Van der Vlerk, 2005), or trainer (Simons and Bolhuis, 2004). This 'coach' plays the role of being a critical friend to examine together with the participant, what works and what does not, in the (new) practical situation of the participant (Ratio and Hall, 1999). Here it is necessary to practice timely 'expectation-management', to highlight which chances the participant possibly can have after learning mobility (De Zwart et al., 2015).

5.3. The participant: The setting of goals and the increase in self-direction

Despite the supportive work of the coach, eventually, the participant must accomplish things by themselves to take part in learning mobility. Promoting independence and increasing self-direction, goes hand in hand with making goals during learning mobility. In an optimal situation, the participant should determine how, where and when they learn (Ryan and Deci, 2000). According to Ratio and Hall (1999) the participant should self-reflect on what they are doing to be able to take their own decisions. During the learning process one must be willing to guide oneself (Grace and Smith, 2001) – to start totally independently and to be autonomous (Gerber, 2012).

The way in which someone is willing to guide himself or herself, depends on their needs, and those of the coach (De Greef and Bohnenn, 2011). Also, for the disadvantaged learners there must be accurate communication to determine what they can do for themselves and what must be done by the coach (e.g., assessment and certification).

Self-direction in learning is directly connected with setting goals. The participants eventually must be able to set their own goals, increasingly independently. They should be involved in the assessment (Tighe et al., 2013), to be able to make these goals by themselves. This should be developed to help the participant prepare for future challenges (Gerber, 2012) – for example when they have a job in which the acquired knowledge, skills and attitude will need to be applied.

5.4. Transfer: The promotion of internalisation of what is learned into daily life

Although the group of people with special needs or fewer opportunities is very heterogenic, they can join learning for the same reason and they can strive for the same goal e.g., learning digital skills, improving tasks in daily life, becoming more assertive or finding a sustainable job. To provide a constructive learning process for these disadvantaged learners, one must facilitate possibilities to apply the learned knowledge, skills, and competences in daily life. In other words, transfer during learning ensures learning success. Therefore, one should increase the transfer possibilities during learning. Lupi et al. (2010) conducted an impact study in different European countries, concerning learning among adults with a low proficiency in basic skills. It showed that transfer possibilities seem to be one of the most important levers for increasing learning success (Lupi et al., 2010). The disadvantaged learners need to internalize what they have learned by transferring the learned knowledge, skills and competences into their daily life or work.

In private or work circumstances, the participants must be able to experience what works and what does not, what new knowledge and skills do or do not fit their situation and what attitude is best for them. The environment will partly determine how this new knowledge and skills will be applied. During the learning process, the coach will provide a safe learning environment with a positive atmosphere and examine with the participant what works best. Applying what people with special needs or fewer opportunities have learnt eventually has to evolve naturally, so new habits become natural, and the participant will function differently and/or better in the new job.

In summary, to support the learning mobility of disadvantaged learners we must provide strong educational programmes and projects. The most important elements required to increase the learning mobility are the recognition of the daily life circumstances of the participant, the coach, the goals, and rate of self-direction of the participant, and the transfer possibilities. For a successful European programme focusing on reaching a significant share of disadvantaged learners these conditions should be considered for a possible project within the Erasmus+ programme.

6. Impact of policy-making in Europe and Erasmus+ for disadvantaged learners

According to the results of the policy review, most countries (28 EU + Norway and Iceland), score poorly concerning policy-making for learners with special needs and fewer opportunities, in the support of their mobility during the general or vocational education and training carried out in the initial education system.

Besides, the analysis of topics in the KA1, KA2 and KA3 Erasmus+ projects revealed that a variety of groups of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities have been reached. The percentage per project and per sub-group varies significantly from 0.8% to 11.1% The relative number of involved learners with special needs or fewer opportunities among the CBHE actions seems to be higher and ranges from 26% to 46%.

According to the results of the desk research presented above and the analysis of good practices in various countries, there are several possibilities to increase the learning mobility of specified groups i.e., people with specials needs or fewer opportunities. Can the different European countries support learning mobility for disadvantaged learners, within Article 23(2) of the Erasmus+ Regulation and regarding the learning mobility of individuals (Article 7)? The promotion of social inclusion and the participation of people with special needs or fewer opportunities seeks to stimulate the mobility of these groups.

This chapter describes the most recent results regarding the stimulation of learning mobility for people with special needs or fewer opportunities. It is based on analysis of the 'Mobility Scoreboard of IVET' from CEDEFOP[5] and the results of the realised projects within the funding opportunities of the actions Key Action 1 (Learning Mobility of Individuals), Key Action 2 (Cooperation among organisations and institutions), Key Action 3 (Support for policy reform), Key Action 107 (International Credit Mobility between Programme Countries and Partner Countries) and the Capacity Building in Higher Education[6] (CBHE) action. This analysis focuses on these five key actions of the Erasmus+ Programme, since the results of these projects in action were available.

6.1. Status quo of policy-making for disadvantaged learners

One of the main goals of education is to create the possibility for every citizen to increase their competencies. As a result, every citizen can achieve a better place in society and the labour market. As mentioned before, several groups of learners experience difficulties in their daily life and can be seen as people with special needs or fewer opportunities. During the process of learning, these learners are called 'disadvantaged learners'. In order to give them the opportunity to learn, two things are needed. First, it is necessary that at national level, the European countries develop specialised policies to facilitate learning for these specific groups. Second, based on EU policies, additional possibilities are needed to increase the involvement of disadvantaged learners in learning. The central question is whether current European policies in addition to the national policies provide extra possibilities to stimulate mobility during the general or vocational education and training carried out in the initial education system. More specifically CEDEFOP monitors the development of IVET mobility policies in the different European countries (CEDEFOP, 2016). In order

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[5]   For more information see: https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/mobility-scoreboard. This tool monitors the development in IVET mobility policies in addition to the implementation of the 2011 Council recommendation 'Youth on the move' in Europe.

[6]   These transnational projects facilitate multilateral partnerships in higher education mostly between higher education institutions.

to conduct an analysis concerning the development of support for disadvantaged learners five criteria have to be taken into account (CEDEFOP, 2021):

> 'Countries have a process for setting up countrywide policy targets (whether quantitative or qualitative) in the area of the specific support for disadvantaged IVET learners'
> 'Countries have in place actions to provide disadvantaged learners with support tailored to their specific needs, in particular in the areas of: (a) information and guidance (including targeted information on available programmes), (b) funding (including portability), (c) motivation, (d) preparation, and (e) the use of multipliers'
> 'The existing support actions for disadvantaged learners are coordinated countrywide so as to ensure their consistency, convergence and effectiveness'
> 'The existing support actions for disadvantaged learners are subject to evaluation oriented towards improving the next generation of this policy strand'
> 'Learners are involved in making the support to disadvantaged learners effective and better over time. Involvement is ensured through: (a) a visibility and access policy, (b) learners and stakeholders surveys, (c) impact measurement/assessment of the degree of use'

According to the results of tables 1 and 2 below, it seems that only 12 out of 30 countries (28 EU + Norway and Iceland) have an average score of good, very good or excellent concerning policy-making in support of mobility during the general or vocational education and training carried out in the initial education system, for disadvantaged learners. Countries like Estonia, France, Germany, Lithuania and especially Finland seem to facilitate policies focussing on mobility for disadvantaged learners. This means that most of them have realised a strong process for setting up policy targets for this group. They facilitate different actions to realise this kind of support, which is coordinated nationwide. Finally they evaluate these actions and involve learners and stakeholders in order to improve them. The other 60% of countries score rather low on the realisation of policy for learner mobility of disadvantaged learners – in particular, countries like Austria, Belgium, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Malta, The Netherlands and Slovenia largely do not have a process for setting up policy targets to support disadvantaged learners. Indeed, most of them have not taken any action on this or do not coordinate this. In most of these countries, any actions that do occur, are not monitored or involve the learners and stakeholders to help improve these actions.

Table 1: Legend concerning scores of specific support to disadvantaged learners per country based on results of the Mobility Scoreboard for IVET of CEDEFOP (2021).

	Excellent performance
	Very good performance
	Good performance
	Some progress has been made
	No progress has been made so far
	No data available

Table 2: Specific support to disadvantaged learners per country based on results of the Mobility Scoreboard for IVET of CEDEFOP (2021).

Criterion → / Country ↓	Indicator 9 'Specific support to disadvantaged learners'	Criterion 9.1 Target setting	Criterion 9.2 Action taking	Criterion 9.3 Coordination	Criterion 9.4 Evaluation	Criterion 9.5 Involving learners and stakeholders
Average of all countries	orange	orange	orange	yellow	orange	orange
Austria	red	red	red	red	red	red
Belgium	red	red	red	red	red	red
Bulgaria	orange	red	orange	red	green	yellow
Croatia	yellow	red	light green	green	yellow	red
Cyprus	orange	red	orange	yellow	red	yellow
Czech Republic	yellow	red	red	green	green	red
Denmark	orange	red	red	green	red	red
Estonia	light green	green	yellow	yellow	yellow	light green
Finland	green	green	light green	green	green	light green
France	light green	green	orange	green	green	green
Germany	light green	green	light green	green	green	yellow
Greece	yellow	green	orange	yellow	yellow	red
Hungary	orange	red	red	yellow	yellow	red
Iceland	red	red	red	red	red	red
Ireland	red	red	red	yellow	red	red
Italy	red	red	red	red	red	red
Latvia	yellow	red	light green	yellow	yellow	light green
Lithuania	light green	green	green	green	yellow	light green
Luxembourg	orange	green	orange	red	red	red
Malta	red	red	red	red	red	red
Netherlands	red	red	red	yellow	red	red
Norway	yellow	red	yellow	green	yellow	yellow
Poland	orange	orange	orange	yellow	yellow	red
Portugal	orange	red	orange	yellow	yellow	red
Romania						
Slovakia	yellow	green	yellow	yellow	yellow	red
Slovenia	red	red	red	red	red	red
Spain	orange	red	orange	red	yellow	yellow
Sweden		red				red
United Kingdom	yellow	red	yellow	yellow	yellow	yellow

A significant share of the European countries scores rather low on the realisation of policy-making for disadvantaged learners. In order to support their learning mobility during initial education, extra European policies seem to be needed. For example, possibly provided by the European programme Erasmus+. The question is whether the programme raises extra attention for disadvantaged learners and if so, how countries use these opportunities in relation to their national policies.

6.2. Impact of Erasmus+ projects on disadvantaged learners

The Erasmus+ programme facilitates different European projects, and pays special attention to people with special needs or fewer opportunities in the different European countries. Based on the results of the mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme, 11.5% of the total number of participants in the Erasmus+ programme seems to be disadvantaged young people (European Commission, 2018). This analysis focuses on the aforementioned five actions mentioned earlier, because only the results of the projects in these actions were available. According to Table 3 in the last seven years of the programme, the projects within Key Actions 1, 2 and 3 concentrated on different sub-groups of people with special needs or fewer opportunities, namely:

1   People with disabilities and/or special needs
2   Disadvantaged learners
3   Early school leavers
4   Gender equality
5   Refugees
6   Migrants
7   Romas and other minorities

According to table 3 most attention has been paid in Key Action 1 and 2 to disadvantaged learners, early school leavers and people with disabilities and/or special needs. This seems to be comparable with Key Action 3, although for the latter, more attention has been raised for gender issues instead of early school leaving. According to table 4, circa 10% of the projects of Key Action 1 and 2 consider people with special needs or fewer opportunities. This seems to be lower for the projects under Key Action 3, that of circa 5%. This became clear after analysis of the number of projects focussing on the different topics as mentioned in table 3.

Table 3: Chosen topics relating to learners with special needs or fewer opportunities per key action of Erasmus+ 2014 – 2020 (in %)

Kind of project → Topic ↓	KA 1 projects	KA 2 projects	KA 3 projects
Disabilities – special needs	4.0	5.1	2.3
Access for disadvantaged	6.3	6.4	5.5
Early school leaving / combating failure in education	5.6	8.2	1.9
Gender equality / equal opportunities	2.3	3.5	3.7
Integration of refugees	1.6	3.1	1.6
Migrants' issues	1.6	3.2	1.6
Romas and / or other minorities	1.0	0.8	1.5
Total group first priority	8.5	11.1	5.2

Besides the KA1, KA2 and KA3 actions, the specialised Key Action 107[7] focussing on International Credit Mobility between Programme Countries and Partner Countries has also been evaluated (Bunescu et al., 2020). Based on the results of the international evaluation, it appears that the International Credit Mobility did not promote the mobility of disadvantaged learners from partner countries in an effective or significant way. Although it did contribute to the learning mobility of disadvantaged learners, since 28% of the analysed group of learners had a non-academic background (Bunescu et al., 2020). One of the main reasons, is that in the evaluated regions (Eastern Partnership, South-Mediterranean and Western Balkans) it is not evident how many people with special needs or fewer opportunities participated in International Credit Mobility, because a constructive process of collection and publishing of data was missing (Bunescu et al., 2020).

Additionally, based on the evaluation of the CBHE action, it seems that in three regions in Europe, a significant share of the involved learners seems to be people with special needs or fewer opportunities. In the Eastern Partnership around 26% of the CBHE projects include a priority concerning the involvement of people with fewer opportunities, which appears to be comprised of 33% of the CBHE projects in the South Mediterranean Region and 46% in the Western Balkans (EACEA, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

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[7] Key Action 107 includes projects concerning Higher education student and staff mobility between Programme and Partner Countries.

7. Results from the survey and the phenomenographic research

According to the results of the online survey and interviews most of the Erasmus+ national agencies and realised projects seem to strive for a broad definition and interpretation concerning the group of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. The categories of the Programme Guide of the Erasmus+ Programme seem to be used by most of the agencies.

Second, the Erasmus+ national agencies have reached 277.997 learners with special needs and fewer opportunities, which totals 17% of the overall number of learners but this varies noticeably between countries. Additionally it became clear, in several countries, it is very difficult to accurately monitor the number of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities being reached.

Furthermore, some of the Erasmus+ national agencies seem to have strong strategies in reaching out to learners with special needs and fewer opportunities. But again this differs between countries.

Finally, there are several barriers, which prevent learners with special needs and fewer opportunities from taking part in the international projects of the Erasmus+ Programme. Although there appear to be differences between the agencies and the countries, five barriers seem to be common. These are:

> Language barriers
> Financial barriers
> Psychological barriers
> Administrative barriers
> Unfamiliarity with the programme

It is important to determine, how many learners with special needs and fewer opportunities have been reached by the different Erasmus+ national agencies within the Erasmus+ Programme. First, it was interesting to analyse the different perspectives on how this group of learners is defined and which categories seem to be important to each country. Second, the analysis shows the number of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities that have been reached. Third, a specific analysis regarding which part of the Erasmus+ Programme can be seen as providing best practice in the participation of these learners. Finally, impediments to participation were analysed.

7.1. Definition of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities by Erasmus+ national agencies

According to most respondents of the online survey, there are different official documents and policies, which underline the importance of supporting learners with special needs and fewer opportunities. Some examples have been mentioned, like the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Strategy on Disability post-2020, the EU Cohesion policy legislative package 2021-2027, but also the explicit categories of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities in the programme guide of the Erasmus+ Programme. Besides this, other international organisations seem to focus on the concept of inclusion and the perspective of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities like UNESCO and the World Bank with their Disability-Inclusive Development. There are different categories concerning learners with special needs and fewer opportunities e.g., disabled learners, LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) persons, youngsters in NEET situations (Not in Education, Employment or Training), mentally disabled, economically

disabled and unemployed youth. Most of the Erasmus+ national agencies are satisfied that in the last years more and more awareness has been raised for the learners with special needs and fewer opportunities.

According to the definition of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities almost all Erasmus+ national agencies involved in this study maintain a broad scope of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities. Some of them use the definition based on legislation in their own country like Finland and Slovenia. But these are exceptions among the Erasmus+ national agencies. Most of them also focus on all categories mentioned in the programme guide, applying to learners experiencing:

1   Disabilities
2   Health problems
3   Educational difficulties
4   Cultural differences
5   Economic obstacles
6   Social obstacles
7   Geographical obstacles

In some countries, the Erasmus+ national agencies focus on specific categories, because of problems with these learners. For example, in Hungary it seems to be difficult to reach learners in remote areas and in Belgium the priority is learners experiencing educational difficulties.

Most of the Erasmus+ national agencies use tools like the final applications and reports to determine if learners with special needs and fewer opportunities have been reached. So, most of the time, it relies on the applicants in the application procedure. The agencies describe their group of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities and explain which learners they will reach in their projects. In some cases they ask for additional information like a birth certificate (e.g., Germany) or a doctor's report (e.g., Turkey).

7.2. Number of reached learners with special needs and fewer opportunities by Erasmus+ national agencies

The analysis has shown that most of the Erasmus+ national agencies involved in the study, actually do reach learners with special needs and fewer opportunities. Although the range varies considerably between countries, the average across 21 Erasmus+ national agencies in 19 countries is 13.237 learners per country. The total number of disadvantaged learners involved in these countries is 277.997. All categories used in the programme guide seem to be involved in the projects of the Erasmus+ Programme, but the focus differs per country. The average share of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities is 17% of the overall number of learners reached. But this again, varies widely between countries.

Accurate monitoring poses some problems and data regarding learners with special needs and fewer opportunities is not always easy to access. In most cases the Erasmus+ national agencies can use the application forms, intermediate reports and final reports. But the output is not always sufficient for the agencies. Some of them would really like to improve on this but would need the support of the Erasmus+ Programme facilitators. Several Erasmus+ national agencies do put extra effort into monitoring – e.g., the National Agency of France conducts a separate survey on the profiles of the beneficiaries involved in the projects and the National Agency of Sweden uses additional statistics.

7.3. Best practices and hindrances in reaching out learners with special needs and fewer opportunities

There are several ways of reaching out to learners with special needs and fewer opportunities. Most of the Erasmus+ national agencies agree that the best and most effective way is in ongoing cooperation with the stakeholders (e.g. youth centres and schools) where these learners already are involved in projects, and courses, etc. For example, the National Agency of Austria has an ongoing agreement of cooperation with two organisations helping people with special needs and fewer opportunities to enter the job market or begin university studies. Second, Erasmus+ national agencies develop special campaigns, workshops and publications, and use different networks like the Eurodesk Multipliers and the eTwinning ambassadors. The French National Agency has, for example, developed a special panel of actions for the promotion, communication and valorisation of projects. The Belgian agency cooperates intensively with two organisations that know the different schools and centres working with learners with special needs and fewer opportunities. These two organisations invite the different schools and centres for information days concerning the Erasmus+ Programme focussing on special target groups in order to initiate a cooperation.

Which of the different actions of the Erasmus+ Programme can be considered as best practice? According to most of the Erasmus+ national agencies, all actions have their own function and contribute to reaching disadvantaged learners. It varies per National Agency, which action is the most important. It is not clear which one is the best to reach out to learners with special needs and fewer opportunities. According to the Finnish National Agency for example, you can include learners with special needs and fewer opportunities in all actions, including, student mobility in VET and adult learners with fewer opportunities in adult education projects.

According to the Erasmus+ national agencies there are five common barriers, which prevent learners with special needs and fewer opportunities from participating in the Erasmus+ Programme, as follows:

- Language barriers: For a lot of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities it is not possible to use a language different from their mother tongue.
- Financial barriers: In several cases financial support is needed in order to include learners with special needs and fewer opportunities in the different projects. The budget is not always sufficient.
- Psychological barriers: Not every learner with special needs and fewer opportunities would like to say that they have special needs. Also parents have to support this and this can be difficult. Sometimes it is not clear to learners that the Erasmus+ Programme can be something useful to them.
- Administrative barriers: In some cases the projects are too complex for learners with special needs and fewer opportunities. In particular, the administrative part of joining a project seems to be an obstacle to joining.
- Unfamiliarity with the programme: The Erasmus+ Programme is sometimes not known by disadvantaged learners and more information and PR seems to be needed to reach out to these learners.

In addition to the five most common barriers, the various Erasmus+ national agencies mentioned other barriers including, the minimum duration of projects, the accommodation for learners with special needs and fewer opportunities and the fact that organisations cannot access learners with special needs and fewer opportunities.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the results of this mixed-method study, 6 recommendations can be made to ensure the active involvement of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities in the Erasmus+ Programme:

> Recommendation 1: Maintain the broad definition of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities and add an additional focus on age

> Recommendation 2: Stimulate national policy-making concerning learning for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities

> Recommendation 3: Stimulate international projects KA1, KA2 and KA3 to focus on the different sub-groups of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities

> Recommendation 4: Develop an instrument to monitor if learners with special needs or fewer opportunities are being reached

> Recommendation 5: Discuss and implement solutions to the different barriers for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities to enable them to join the international projects of the Erasmus+ Programme

> Recommendation 6: Develop a Community of Practice among the Erasmus+ national agencies concerning PR, good practices and stimulation in respect of the involvement of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities

In order to analyse the involvement of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities in the Erasmus+ Programme, a systematic desk research and policy review has been conducted. In addition an online survey and interviews among the Erasmus+ national agencies in Europe were carried out besides an international case studies analysis. It became clear, whether learners with special needs or fewer opportunities have been involved in the Erasmus+ Programme and if so, what is needed on a policy-making level (macro) and professional educational level (meso) to maintain or increase the participation of these learners.

8.1. Conclusions

First, according to the results of the online survey and interviews most of the Erasmus+ national agencies and realised projects seem to strive for a broad definition and interpretation concerning the group of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. The aforementioned categories of the Programme Guide of the Erasmus+ Programme seems to be used by most of the agencies, specifically:

1   Disabilities
2   Health problems
3   Educational difficulties
4   Cultural differences
5   Economic obstacles
6   Social obstacles
7   Geographical obstacles

Second, according to the results of the policy review most countries (28 EU + Norway and Iceland) score poorly concerning policy-making in support of the mobility of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities, during the general or vocational education and training carried out in the initial education system. Most of them have not taken any action on this or do not coordinate this. If action is taken, most of these countries fail to monitor them or involve the learners and stakeholders in improving on these actions.

Third, the analysis on topics of the KA1, KA2 and KA3 projects reveals that a variety of groups of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities have been reached. These are:

1   People with disabilities and / or special needs
2   Disadvantaged learners
3   Early school leavers
4   Gender equality
5   Refugees
6   Migrants
7   Romas and other minorities

The percentage per type of project and per sub-group varies significantly from 0.8% to 11.1% The relative number of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities involved among the CBHE actions seems to be higher and varies from 26% to 46%.

Fourth, according to the analysis of the online survey and interviews, the Erasmus+ national agencies have reached a sufficient number of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. Based on the results of those agencies involved in this study, 277.997 learners have been reached. The average percentage of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities is 17% of the total number of learners reached, but this varies significantly between countries. Additionally, it became apparent, that monitoring the numbers of these learners being reached, is proving difficult in several countries.

Fifth, some of the Erasmus+ national agencies seem to have strong strategies for reaching out to disadvantaged learners. But again this differs by country. For example, some Erasmus+ national agencies work intensively with different educational institutions in order to reach these learners and in some countries specific campaigns seems to be supportive.

Sixth, there are several barriers, preventing learners with special needs and fewer opportunities from taking part in the international projects of the Erasmus+ Programme. Although, there seems to be differences between the Erasmus+ national agencies and the countries, they seem to have five barriers in common:

1   Language barriers
2   Financial barriers
3   Psychological barriers
4   Administrative barriers
5   Unfamiliarity with the programme

Finally in order to stimulate the involvement of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities, potential education projects need to consider the different conditions required to make it attractive and successful for these learners, namely[8]:

> The foundation: The context of the daily life circumstances

For example, the French organization INFREP (Institut National de Formation et de Recherche sur l'Education Permanente)[9] has developed a standard evaluation tool to examine the profile of an unemployed potential adult learner. This 'tool' is acknowledged by employers and helps the unemployed determine whether they are ready to take a next study programme. In addition, it helps

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[8]   The examples of the good practices mentioned underneath the four different conditions are not carried out under the Erasmus+ Programme, but could inspire the future Erasmus+ projects.

[9]   https://www.infrep.org/

to increase the self-confidence of individuals and provides guidance about careers and the labour market.

> The coach: The importance of the intensive personal face-to-face guidance with reference to disabilities

In the Italian 'PLUS-project'[10] for example (young) adults have been offered the possibility to participate in an 18-month professional training programme, which promotes their own autonomy, and where gaining social and professional skills, is a core element. This type of guidance matching the target group, may provide better study results and stimulates learning mobility.

> The participant: The setting of goals and the increase in self-direction

For example, Norway has set up 'Integration reception centres'[11] where refugees participate in combined education to more effectively find a job in the labour market. Each participant starts full-time and receives a personalised programme to progress quickly into education and thus, the labour market. The participant can in part, self-determine the study programme, which can produce success. In this way, learning mobility could facilitate a sustainable place in the labour market for a specific group with fewer opportunities.

> Transfer: The promotion of internalisation of what is learned into daily life

The project 'The Road to Labour Market'[12] is an intensive Hungarian study programme for job seekers above the age of 25 and aims to increase their employability. The participants get one-to-one coaching focused on finding a job, career advice, and psychological support. They also receive group support by participating in societies for finding a job, obtaining additional knowledge, workshops on how to get a job a job and mentoring.

8.2. Recommendations

Based on the results of this mixed-method study, there are 6 recommendations for ensuring an active involvement of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities in the Erasmus+ Programme:

> Recommendation 1: Maintain the broad definition of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities and add an additional focus on age

Most of the Erasmus+ national agencies are satisfied with the broad definition and different categories of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities defined in the Programme Guide. Due to the fact that the disadvantaged learner groups differ per country, the broad definition has to be maintained. Additionally an extra category should be added. Based on the results of the desk research, older people seem to face difficulties where education could be supportive. Therefore, a special focus on obstacles based on age is needed.

> Recommendation 2: Stimulate national policy-making concerning learning for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities

A significant share of countries do not realise policy-making (see Section 9 below) concerning learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. This should be stimulated to implement the

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[10]   https://www.disabili.com/lavoro/articoli-lavoro/formazione-e-opportunita-di-lavoro-per-persone-con-disabilita-in-16-regioni-italiane

[11]   https://nordicwelfare.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/new-in-the-nordic-countries-EN-web.pdf

[12]   https://nfsz.munka.hu/tart/szervezetunk

results of the projects that focus on learners with special needs or fewer opportunities in respect of the Erasmus+ Programme in the different countries.

> **Recommendation 3: Stimulate international projects KA1, KA2 and KA3 to focus on the different sub-groups of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities**

Specifically the representation of chosen topics relating to different subgroups of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities seems to be underrepresented in the KA1, KA2 and KA3 projects. This can be stimulated among the potential beneficiaries of these projects.

> **Recommendation 4: Develop an instrument to monitor if learners with special needs or fewer opportunities are being reached**

For several Erasmus+ national agencies it seems to be difficult to monitor the number of learners reached with special needs or fewer opportunities. In some cases legislation prevents the registration of data, but tools for registration also seem to be missing. This makes it difficult to compare results between countries and to report on the reached number of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities.

> **Recommendation 5: Discuss and implement solutions to the different barriers for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities to enable them to join the international projects of the Erasmus+ Programme**

Although in some countries many disadvantaged learners have been reached, some common barriers remain, preventing them from joining the international projects of the Erasmus+ Programme. To increase the number of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities in these projects barriers, like language, finances, psychological problems, administration and unfamiliarity with the programme itself should be examined and resolved.

> **Recommendation 6: Develop a Community of Practice among the Erasmus+ national agencies concerning PR, good practices and stimulation in respect of the involvement of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities**

Professionals at the different Erasmus+ national agencies can be seen as experts in different parts of the Erasmus+ Programme. It became clear that some of them already have for example, strong solutions concerning PR to reach out to learners with special needs or fewer opportunities and have developed the conditions of projects for these learners. If one establishes a Community of Practice among the professionals of the Erasmus+ national agencies, the shared learning would be helpful in optimizing the infrastructure to better reach learners with special needs or fewer opportunities.

9. Implications for the macro level

One of the recommendations from the field and desk research is to stimulate national policy-making concerning learning for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. In order to realise this on an international and national level, possible guidelines have to be provided. Some of the most important guidelines are UNESCO's priorities and policies and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations. These can support the development of a framework of policy-making for the education of learners with special needs and fewer opportunities.

As a result of this study, one of the recommendations is to stimulate (inter)national policy-making concerning education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. As mentioned before, this is important to increase the learning mobility of disadvantaged learners at the macro level (see

Figure 3: Focus on the macro level
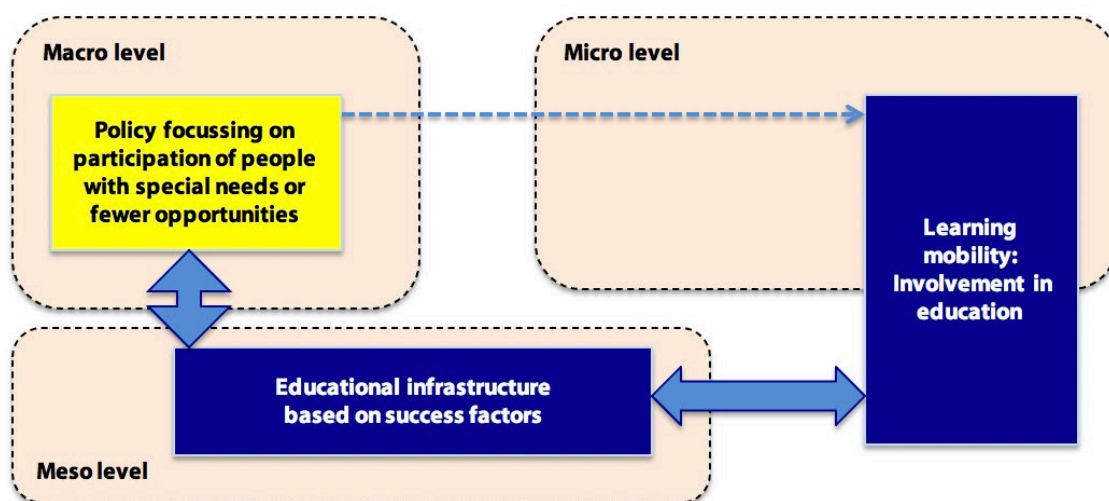
the yellow section in figure 3). Which important international guidelines or policies can be supportive in setting up national policy-making for these learners?

Source: the author

In this last phase of this study some guidelines will be provided in order to create more synergies, complementarities and linkages between the Erasmus+ Programme and important policies on the international macro level concerning learning for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. In this chapter possible guidelines have been provided in order to create synergies and complementarities to UNESCO's Priorities and Policies and to the Sustainable Development Goals.

9.1. Synergies and complementarities to UNESCO's Priorities and Policies

As mentioned before, society is still confronted with marginalised groups of inhabitants vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. For example, in 2017,122.3 million people in Europe (24.4%) were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2017). Education can be a lever to enable people with special needs or fewer opportunities. A strong strategy, and policy-making on a macro level could

increase social inclusion by optimising the infrastructure of education available to these disadvantaged learners.

The 'Medium-Term Strategy 2014-2021' of UNESCO is supportive of this need and embraces a strong vision, based on nine Strategic Objectives, to include more citizens in our daily society. According to the European Commission (2015) education is a vital field serving the Europe 2020 targets on poverty reduction, employment, sustainability, education and innovation. According to the third 'Global Report on Adult Learning and Education' (GRALE 3) the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2016), underlines the importance of learning and education, because it can support the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. Increasingly, it is clear that investments in learning and education on a macro level benefit a variety of fields like wellbeing, health, social, civic and community life, employment and the labour market (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2016).

The GRALE 3 survey stated that in nine out of ten countries, the impact of adult learning and education (in which education of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities has its roots) increased (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2016). Additionally, more than half of the countries agree that adult learning and education can have an effect on employability. Even more adult learning and education seems to play an inescapable role in the future challenges of technological change, environmental sustainability, employment, migration and inequality (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2016). Therefore, investment in adult learning and education and especially education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities, appears to be valuable in creating a society in which equal opportunities, social inclusion and employment are sustained within a healthy community.

Although investment in learning and education for disadvantaged learners seems to benefit several fields in our society, the GRALE 3 report of UNESCO's Institute for Lifelong Learning shows that the current system of adult learning and education is still not sufficient to develop a sustainable system of adult learning and education. Currently, 35% of the countries show that collaboration between departments is poor and 64 countries state that inadequate or misdirected funding is still an important prohibiting factor to realising education in this field (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2016). Therefore, it seems to be important to encourage collaboration between decision-makers and professionals in the field of learning and education by developing national policies for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities.

One of the most important strategies to reduce inequality among learners and to increase the chances for disadvantaged learners is the 'Medium-Term Strategy 2014-2021' (UNESCO, 2014). To strengthen the position of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities, the first six out of nine Strategic Objectives (UNESCO, 2014) can be used as guidelines to set up focused (inter)national policy-making:

1   *Supporting Member States to develop education systems to foster high-quality and inclusive lifelong learning for all (objective 1)*

In order to realise national polices focusing on learners with special needs or fewer opportunities the individual European countries can cooperate with other countries on different continents, to embrace good practices of education for these learners. Based on these good practices, policy-makers and decision-makers can gain new insights and realise a strong national policy framework of education, which can be adopted by their own national programme of learning.

2   *Empowering learners to be creative and responsible global citizens (objective 2)*

Each national policy concerning learners, must focus on supporting learners with special needs or fewer opportunities to support them becoming creative and responsible citizens. Based on different theories of learning, policy-makers can facilitate a new framework to develop learning pathways for disadvantaged learners. Through the development of these policies, schools and learning centres

will be able to implement a new framework of education for these learners in their learning settings in each country. The focus has to be on policy-making on a national, regional and local level to facilitate this education.

3   *Advancing Education for All (EFA) and shaping the future international education agenda (objective 3)*

By realising national policies for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities not only education will be impacted and benefit, but also other life-domains like employment, health and wellbeing. Recent studies show that the rate of social inclusion and the labour market position of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities will increase after receiving education. Through this, the new national policies of the different countries will contribute to the strengthening of a holistic, future international education agenda (connected to several life-domains), linked to the sustainable development of the different nations.

4   *Strengthening science, technology and innovation systems and policies nationally, regionally and globally (objective 4)*

In order to realise new policies for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities a cooperation between science and policy is necessary. The outcome of scientific studies should be used to discuss the importance of learning for these learners with policy-makers and decision-makers and to optimise policy-making in different nations. Therefore, it is necessary to translate the results of the different studies into implications for policy-makers. It will be important to conduct studies, which can be used on different levels in different countries. Based on a global vision on education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities, insights and frameworks in learning can then be used on a national, regional and local level to shape policy-making and the learning pathways for disadvantaged learners.

5   *Promoting international scientific cooperation on critical challenges to sustainable development (objective 5)*

International scientific cooperation is essential to create strong policies on education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities, that can be used by different nations. Therefore on an international level one has to develop policies describing how universities in different countries all over the world can collaborate to conduct cross-cultural analyses. These analyses can reveal the required improvement in the education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities per country. Through such cooperation and the exchange of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities universities can cooperate on an international level.

6   *Supporting inclusive social development, fostering intercultural dialogue for the rapprochement of cultures and promoting ethical principles (objective 6)*

Finally, the main goal is to realise national, regional and local policies for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities to improve social inclusion and (intercultural) dialogue. The overall goal of investment in education for these learners is to improve life perspectives for these vulnerable citizens and to create better understanding of their position and increase possibilities in their daily life. It seems to be necessary to develop policies, which will have a significant contribution to a better, socially inclusive society, in which citizens understand each other, can be supportive of each other and live together.

9.2. Synergies and complementarities to the Sustainable Development Goals

Besides the connection to the 'Medium-Term Strategy 2014-2021' the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations (United Nations, 2017) can provide guidelines for new policies concerning education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. To develop a holistic policy on education for these learners, the goals can be used to interlink the field of education with strategies for economic growth and the promotion of social needs (including social protection, health, education and job opportunities). Based on an analysis of these 17 Sustainable Development Goals, 7 goals can explicitly be used to facilitate policy-making for the education of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities.

1. *End poverty in all its forms everywhere (goal 1): Extreme poverty rates have been cut by more than half since 1990. While this is a remarkable achievement, one in five people in developing regions still live on less than $1.25 a day, and there are millions more who make little more than this daily amount, plus many people risk slipping back into poverty.*

According to recent studies, even in highly developed countries, only 40% of citizens have sufficient basic financial skills (Van Rooij et al., 2011). Especially older people, women, foreigners, youngsters and the low-educated experience more problems in financial literacy (Almenberg & Säve-Söderbergh, 2011; Arrondel et al., 2013; Boisclair et al., 2015). Some north-western European countries underline the necessity of education to increase financial skills for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. This is an important element in the development of policies concerning education for these learners.

2. *Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages (goal 3): Ensuring healthy lives and promoting the wellbeing for all at all ages is essential to sustainable development. Significant strides have been made in increasing life expectancy and reducing some of the common killers associated with child and maternal mortality.*

Several studies show the additional value and impact of courses for vulnerable citizens on their state of health. According to the results it became clear that 39% of the vulnerable learners perceive better physical health and 53% of them perceive better psychological health (De Greef et al., 2014). Several stakeholders in health and education (professionals and policy-makers) are interested in these results and would like to develop new education programmes focusing on an increase in the state of health for vulnerable citizens. Therefore this should be stressed in new policies concerning education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities.

3. *Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning (goal 4): Obtaining a quality education is the foundation to improving people's lives and sustainable development. Major progress has been made towards increasing access to education at all levels and increasing enrolment rates in schools particularly for women and girls. Basic literacy skills have improved tremendously, yet bolder efforts are needed to make even greater strides for achieving universal education goals.*

According to the results of various studies, the impact and additional value of education on social inclusion and labour market position can be explored and identified. Based on the results it seems to be necessary to promote lifelong learning and to ensure inclusive and quality education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. Therefore, the accessibility for joining education should be improved to increase the opportunity for lifelong learning by 2030. Lifelong learning should be a basic right, facilitated by (inter)national policies. For example, equal access for all genders to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including universities, can be realised and increased by the development of these policies. Furthermore, recent studies and innovative pathways for lifelong learning focusing on literacy, numeracy and

basic skills ensure that more and more youngsters and adults achieve literacy and numeracy. This is important for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities in order to acquire knowledge and skills needed to increase their chances in life. Therefore, new policies in education should underline the contribution to sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity.

4   *Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (goal 5): While the world has achieved progress towards gender equality and women's empowerment under the Millennium Development Goals (including equal access to primary education between girls and boys), women and girls continue to suffer discrimination and violence in every part of the world. (…) Providing women and girls with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in political and economic decision-making processes will fuel sustainable economies and benefit societies and humanity at large.*

Several studies explored the impact of a specialised programme focusing on equal access to education and the labour market for women. These women get more opportunities to increase their basic skills and their labour market position. Recently the impact of these programmes has been explored and disseminated among several partners in education and gender issues, e.g., in Croatia and Latvia. Based on the successful results, gender based equal opportunities should be included in policies for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities.

5   *Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all (goal 8): Roughly half the world's population still lives on the equivalent of about US$2 a day. And in too many places, having a job doesn't guarantee the ability to escape from poverty. (…) The creation of quality jobs will remain a major challenge for almost all economies well beyond 2015. Sustainable economic growth will require societies to create the conditions that allow people to have quality jobs that stimulate the economy while not harming the environment. Job opportunities and decent working conditions are also required for the whole working-age population.*

Education can contribute to sustainable employment for all and decent work for all. New policies for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities have to be developed to provide better job opportunities. In cooperation with educational centres, national, regional and local policies should focus on learning for a better place in society and better vocational skills. These innovative policies in education will contribute to better job opportunities for disadvantaged learners and will contribute to the goal of realising decent work for all.

6   *Reduce inequality within and among countries (goal 10): The international community has made significant strides towards lifting people out of poverty. The most vulnerable nations - the least developed countries, the landlocked developing countries and the small island developing states - continue to make inroads into poverty reduction. However, inequality still persists and large disparities remain in access to health and education services and other assets. (…) To reduce inequality, policies should be universal in principle, paying attention to the needs of disadvantaged and marginalised populations.*

Results of policy reviews and studies have shown that cooperation between countries can benefit policies and infrastructure on education for the different countries themselves. As a result the infrastructure of education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities can be optimised. Among others, based on the work of international networks like the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), it is possible to implement good practices in the least developed countries to strengthen their educational policies for disadvantaged learners and reduce unequal chances for their vulnerable citizens. This can possibly result in reducing the education gap and social inequality between countries. Therefore, international cooperation seems to be an important element for new policies concerning education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities.

10. Implications for the meso level

The third recommendation based on the field and desk research, is to stimulate international projects KA1, KA2 and KA3 to focus on the different sub-groups of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. To achieve this, four elements on the meso level have been identified:

> The foundation: The context of the daily life circumstances.
> The coach: The importance of the intensive personal face-to-face guidance with reference to disabilities.
> The participant: The setting of goals and the increase in self-direction.
> Transfer: The promotion of internalisation of what is learned into daily life.

An analysis of international case studies has been conducted to show how countries all over the world develop new initiatives for an infrastructure of education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities. This can be used as an inspiration for each country, and its schools and learning centres, to increase learning mobility for these learners.

As a result of this study, one of the recommendations is to stimulate the development of educational

Figure 4: Focus on the meso level
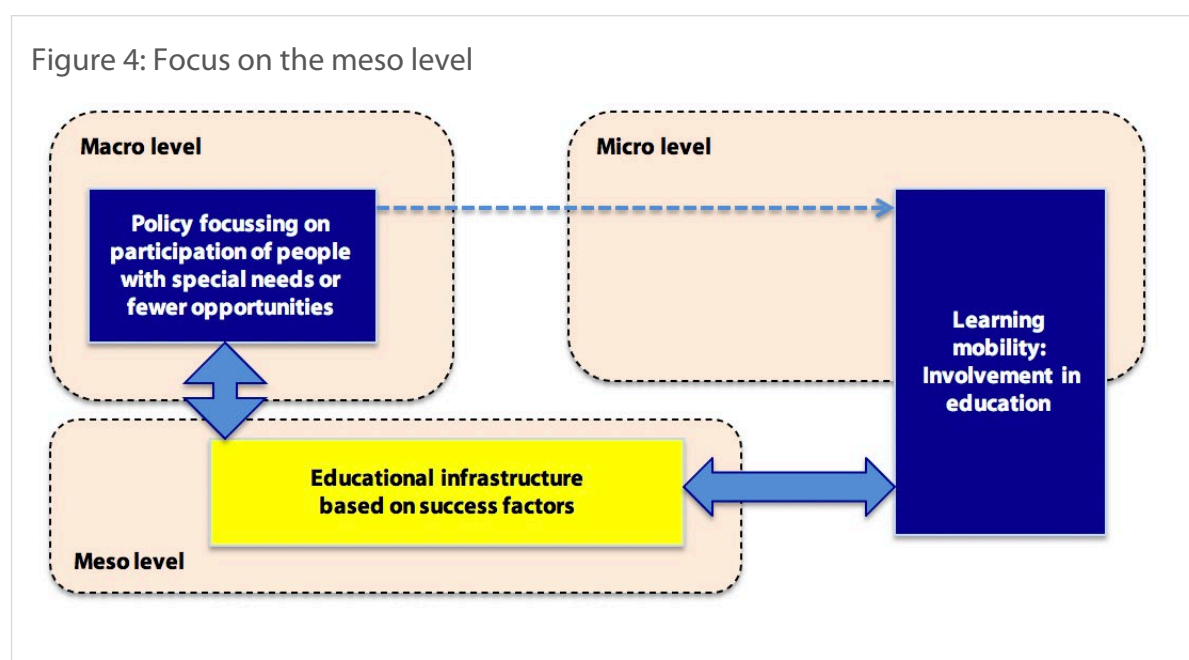
projects (KA1, KA2 and KA3), focusing on education for disadvantaged learners. As mentioned before, one of the important levels to increase the learning mobility of disadvantaged learners, is at the meso level (see the yellow section in figure 4).

Source: the author

In this last phase of this study some guidelines will also be provided in order to create more synergies, complementarities and linkages between the Erasmus+ Programme and the educational infrastructure on the meso level. How can schools and learning centres establish these projects and be successful?

An international case studies analysis has been conducted to show examples of these projects. The examples of the good practices are not carried out under the Erasmus+ Programme, but could

inspire the future Erasmus+ projects. These case studies have been divided into the four elements which have been defined based on the field research. These are:

> The foundation: The context of the daily life circumstances.
> The coach: The importance of the intensive personal face-to-face guidance with reference to disabilities.
> The participant: The setting of goals and the increase in self-direction.
> Transfer: The promotion of internalisation of what is learned into daily life.

10.1. The foundation: The context of the daily life circumstances

First, in order to increase the learning mobility of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities it seems to be important to take the context of their daily life circumstances into consideration. In this section, several best practices from different countries are described to inspire schools and learning centres in Europe to facilitate education for disadvantaged learners on the meso level. At the end of each best practice the Unique Selling Point (USP) has been described in order to underline the potential success for these learners.

France1: Integrated language and profession-orientated programme with employers for migrants and asylum seekers

The Ministry of National Affairs in cooperation with the French National Agency for the professional training of adults, started a specific programme, in which refugees and asylum seekers are offered language training and profession-orientated training. This has been realised in cooperation with employers in sectors which need more employees (e.g., logistics, painter and decorators, and bricklayers businesses). In this specific validation, programmes are used to obtain a professional certificate for the relevant profession.

USP: Trade-orientated validation programmes in cooperation with employers (in which language development and profession-orientated training are being combined).

France 2: Validation of earlier obtained competences for refugees in the ICT sector

The programme 'Refugeeks' provides an intensive training programme for vulnerable refugees in the area of 'Information & Communications Technology' (ICT). This programme increases their chances of getting a job in the ICT sector. The participants are offered a specific programme which motivates them to improve their ICT skills and use these professionally. Additionally, they get the possibility to learn specific employee skills which they then can use to eventually obtain a job. The success factor of this training programme is the validation of the earlier obtained competences in the area of ICT, customising the training programme for each participant.

USP: Validation of earlier obtained competences in a specific sector.

France 3: Confidence and support in a profession by validation of earlier obtained competences

The organisation INFREP is specialised in research into permanent education together with the management of profession-orientated training programmes. They evaluate competences to increase the chances in the labour market or for the preparation to undertake education programmes. They developed a standardised evaluation to validate earlier obtained knowledge and competences within a specific profession. This form of evaluation (called CLEA) is applicable for almost every sector and all education levels. This 'tool' is acknowledged by employers and especially helps unemployed people to determine whether they are ready to do an advanced training. It increases self-confidence towards establishing a career in the labour market. A comparable programme is the DAVA programme, in which participants (with at least one year of practical job experience) are able to validate their earlier obtained competences through coaching by an adviser.

USP: Standardised validation of earlier obtained competences for all education levels.

10.2. The coach: The importance of the intensive personal face-to-face guidance with reference to disabilities

Second, in order to increase the learning mobility of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities, it seems to be important to facilitate a good coach. In this paragraph several best practices from different countries are described to inspire schools and learning centres in Europe to facilitate education for these learners at the meso level. At the end of each best practice, the USP is summarised to underline the potential success for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities from having access to a coach.

Canada: Specific support and mentoring for people with a disability - a combined approach

The 'Transitional Vocational Programme' (TVP) is a specific programme to prepare adults with a disability for a job, through training and coaching. It is a post-initial learning environment which guides the transition to employment. The participant takes part in a combination of training in a class setting together with a learning environment at work. Attention is paid to skills in the area of life, employability, the specific profession and giving job experience. This way, the participants increase their skills and knowledge of the job and increase their self-confidence. These results are being achieved through a combination of intensive support and mentoring.

USP: Job experience combined with a class setting and intensive support and mentoring in the area of life skills, employability and professional development.

The Netherlands 1: Route 4 Koning Willem 1 College - A learning environment in combination with routing to a suitable paid job

Unfortunately, young people aged 17 and older are not included in training programmes like Internationale Schakelklas (ISK). The Koning Willem 1 College has developed a specific programme for these participants, so that they have the possibility to obtain a job in the labour market. They are offered an intensive traineeship course, and together with institutes from the wellbeing and care sectors and a study-work company, they get the chance to find a suitable paid job. In this they will be supported by 'peer-coaches', with whom they reflect on how to solve personal problems like debt issues. Apart from participating in training, the participants are able to do a work placement and obtain work experience. As before, a combination of studying and working is offered as well as personal support.

USP: Personal support by peer-coaches integrated into a specialised training programme.

Germany: Investment in one-on-one coaching for ill unemployed people

A regional labour market office in Germany has used one-on-one coaching to help ill, unemployed people. Each participant is given individual coaching, taking a sufficient amount of time to see how best to guide them in a sustainable way towards finding a job. An evaluation by the Justus-Liebig-Universität in Giessen, shows that especially when sufficient time has been given to the one-on-one coaching, it leads to a successful outcome. Evaluation has suggested that there is a difference in the coaching methodology of each employee at the employment office and that the understanding of the coaching methodology is weak, but better results are achieved by specifically having more time for each participant. Because more time is taken for each job seeker at the outset, there is greater success with re-integration to a job and more satisfaction amongst the participants.

USP: Taking time for one-on-one-coaching.

Italy: Specific programme in professional education for people with a disability

In Italy, the 'PLUS' project provides an extra impulse for the re-integration of young adults and adults with a disability. In 16 regions (young) adults with a disability are offered the possibility to participate in a professional training programme of 40 hours a week and lasting 18 months. The training consists of promoting their own autonomy together with obtaining social and professional skills. On completion, they will join a work placement practice in a company in the trade matching their professional training. Here, time is given to apply in practice what is learned. Additionally, some participants will be involved in starting an office for advising and supporting people in finding a job.

USP: Customised professional training, taking restrictions into account.

Croatia: CARDS 2004 - Combined basic education with profession-orientated training

During the project 'CARDS 2004', 4945 people were offered training focused on basic skills (especially language) and additionally (when desirable) profession-orientated training for a chosen profession, based on several selected professions. Apart from regular instruction, there was attention to individual consultation and instruction. Certain elements made it possible for people to participate in this training. People got a refund for travel expenses and study materials. Additionally, a pleasant learning environment with good quality education and well qualified teachers was supportive. Eventually funding from the Croatian government ensured that the programme could be developed further.

USP: Individual attention to individual consultation and instruction together with refunding costs.

Czech Replublique: Pro-active contact in guiding low-skilled people towards education

By participating in the international project 'Guidance and Orientation for Adult Learners' (GOAL), the Czech Replublique gave extra attention to guiding low-skilled people into education and training. The project was based on five intervention strategies: networks and partnerships, tools to facilitate extra guidance, defining specific competences by advisers to identify needs, outreaching activities and the development of a high-quality service guiding participants. It became clear that face-to-face contact is most effective and suitable for this target group. According to the advisers, coaching was the most effective when the individual was actively participating. However, the adviser should not take the responsibility away from the participant, but the initiative for coaching can be taken by the adviser.

USP: Pro-active attitude and face-to-face contact.

Sweden: Adapted ICT programme for young adults in an individualised, multi-discipined learning environment

In Sweden, a specifically adapted ICT programme on the level of high secondary and university education has been developed for young adults experiencing autism. They have participated in a combined study programme in the area of, amongst others, computer systems and programming. Doing a work placement practice was part of the programme. The participants were coached by a multi-discipline team consisting of a head teacher, a professional therapist, a psychiatrist, a university lecturer, a psychologist and a contact from an employment office. For several participants their position in the labour market has improved and some of them have found a job. This was also assisted by some adjustments to the study programme. These adjustments consisted of a clear structure of what should be done, together with the provision of a learning environment in which one felt noticed, acknowledged and understood, in addition to the provision of individual workstations.

USP: Acknowledging restrictions together with appropriate multi-disciplined support for finding a place in the labour market.

10.3. The participant: The setting of goals and the increase in self-direction

Third, in order to increase the learning mobility of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities, it seems to be important to stimulate among participants the setting of goals, and self-direction in learning. In this section several best practices from different countries are described to inspire schools and learning centres in Europe to facilitate education for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities on the meso level. At the end of each best practice, the USP is highlighted, to underline the potential success for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities from the practice itself.

Denmark: Individualised route in education for refugees

Denmark has developed a route as short as possible for refugees to be able to re-integrate to the labour market with the project 'Industry packages'. In this project, based on the needs of the business sector for each participant, they determine what qualifications are required to participate in the labour market. The explicit goal is to find a regular job, by defining for each person, what conditions are required to obtain a job in a specific sector. In this, possible obstructions and any specific training needed are considered, to increase the chances of obtaining a job. The offer consists of systematic training in which concrete goals are defined which can lead to finding a job. Optimising language capability is also one of the considerations.

USP: Extensive personal quick-scan with an additional customised offer.

Ireland: Educational fund with local multi-disciplined customised projects

In Ireland, the 'Labour Market Activation Fund' (LMAF 2010) has been created to provide training and education for especially low-skilled people and long-term unemployed people (particularly in the construction, production and industrial industries and the skilled trades industry). The goal is to increase employability for these participants and to enable them to acquire more and varied skills. The LMAF 2010 is an intensive programme with projects in 5 categories. It focuses on obtaining basic or professional skills in a specific sector or enlarging career possibilities. Additionally, it is possible to obtain entrepreneur skills, specific skills training in a particular sector or achieve a higher level in education. A significant share of the participants who successfully finished the programme also found a job, started their own company or continued with more advanced training. Success factors of the most effective projects were the focus on employability results, and the intensive cooperation between education and training institutions, local authorities and departments for wellbeing.

USP: Flexible financing of educational programmes based on customisation of local cooperation.

Latvia: Campaign and financial impulse for education

In Latvia, with an extra impulse from the European Social Fund, cooperation with the Ministry of Economics and the Adult Education Governing Board, 11.023 participants (including low-skilled people) were able to participate in education. The education focused on obtaining professional competences for sectors that expect to need employees in the near future. The educational programmes were provided by 81 local authorities with a coordinator in adult education in each area. The task of this coordinator was to identify the educational needs of participants, informing participants about the educational opportunities and facilitating cooperation with local companies. To support this, information campaigns were run to promote the opportunities.

USP: Individual education budget with the guidance of a coordinator in adult education, stimulated by information campaigns.

Norway: Active route to work by training in reception centres

During the process for a request of political asylum, refugees often have to wait passively for a long time. In the 'Integration Reception Centres' in Norway, refugees are working with combined education to eventually be able to get a job in the labour market. Through this, the participants are getting an holistic offer consisting of improving language skills, learning cultural and social services, together with actively participating in daily tasks and activities in the reception centre and additionally obtaining career coaching. To be able to achieve this, the reception centres cooperate with centres for career coaching, offices for labour and wellbeing, and companies. Each participant gets to work full-time and is offered a customised programme to get into work as soon as possible in tandem with the support of education.

USP: Activation by individual route to study and work.

The Netherlands 2: academy for Independence: Chances for advanced training and work for people with a slight mental disability

The 'academy for Independence' is an initiative that includes people with a slight mental disability, in which the participants learn to be more independent in the arena of day-to-day life and the working environment. One of the locations is the academy for Independence at ROC Landstede in Harderwijk. Together with wellbeing, care and labour institutes, participants are offered a training programme in which they are supported by a teacher/ trainer together with a job coach and a community coach to, support them living more independently, and achieve a place in the labour market. The intensive cooperation between the different disciplines from different sectors, together with the commitment from the individual environment and a practical content which promotes the transfer, are making this a successful learning pathway.

USP: Stimulation of self-direction with multi-disciplinary guiding.

Romania: Area orientated working for qualifications matching the profile

The 'Association for Social and Economic Counselling and Consultancy Oltenia' (A.C.C.E.S Oltenia) has the assignment for the region of Ocolna in the area of Amarastii de Jos to improve the place in society for a large group of people. In this area there are a lot of 'vulnerable' people. By organising specific training in areas like nutrition, construction and beauty care, they also try to provide people a place in the labour market. Before the participants attend this training, they are offered counselling. This is to determine their professional skills and qualities. Eventually a personal profile is created to develop a training plan which best matches the participant.

USP: Counselling to make personal profile for participation in suitable professional training.

10.4. Transfer: The promotion of internalisation of what is learned into daily life

Fourth, in order to increase the learning mobility of learners with special needs or fewer opportunities, it seems to be important to stimulate the transfer possibilities. In this section, several best practices from different countries are described in order to inspire schools and learning centres in Europe to facilitate education for disadvantaged learners the meso level. At the end of each best practice, the USP is highlighted, to underline the potential success for learners with special needs or fewer opportunities of the practice itself.

Belgium: Structural cooperation in training basic skills for low-skilled people

The Flemish Service for Labour Mediation and Professional training (VDAB) is the Flemish organisation that guides job seekers towards finding a job. In this role, they collaborate intensively with the Centres for Basic Education (CBE's). Because of this, they are able to directly offer training

to low-skilled people in the area of basic skills. When someone is unemployed, first of all it is checked whether they have sufficient digital skills (e.g., working with a pc, working on the internet, making a profile for LinkedIn and working with their own 'job seekers file' using 'My Career') and whether they have competences to look for a job independently. The philosophy is to allow sufficient time to get started, but when this is unsuccessful, a participant will receive a phone call from the VDAB (usually within 6 weeks) and if necessary, a meeting with a mediator from the region. When a job seeker lacks the basic skills, training is obligatory at a centre for adult education to increase their competences. Should an individual not participate appropriately, a separate section of the VDAB will consider the possible consequences with the job seeker.

USP: Structural cooperation concerning basic skills with CBE's for extra training of low-skilled people.

France 4: A second chance for a qualification through a competence-orientated approach to private, work, and social areas.

E2C94 is a 'second chance school' in the region of Val-de-Marne in France. In particular, young participants who did not obtain a formal qualification are offered an 8-to-10-month study programme. This study programme is organised in cooperation with regional companies. The goal is to combine a work placement together with training. The study programmes are partly based on the validation of competences within 8 domains covering private and work areas and paying particular attention to social competences. Because of the cooperation with companies, the participants are offered the chance to be able to participate in conferences, visits to different companies, participation in education projects in companies or a traineeship, together with training and work placement practice. This means, participants are offered the possibility to orientate themselves in different sectors and are coached in the design of their career possibilities.

USP: Career possibilities by orientation in business and a combined approach in the area of social, private and work competences.

Hungary: Investment in psychological and social preconditions for employability

The project 'The Road to Labour Market' is an intensive training programme in Hungary for job seekers above the age of 25. Among other things, the purpose is to improve their employability. The participants attend a customised training programme to finish lower secondary education, obtain professional qualifications and a driver's license. The participants get one-on-one coaching - how to find a job in their own career opportunities along with psychological support. There is also group support in addition to participation in associations for finding a job, obtaining additional knowledge, workshops concerning the route to a job and mentoring. There is additional financial support for training costs, travel and accommodation costs but within certain limits. A similar project, 'Improving Chances for Training and Employment for Women', is mainly focused on women from the Roma population. They are directly connected to an employer and at the same time can obtain sector-specific knowledge and skills while developing their social attitude and competences for the sector they work in.

USP: Psychological and social development together with financial support partly agreed with the (potential) employer.

Austria: Promoting re-integration after accident or illness

The Berufliches Bildungs und Rehabilitationszentrum (BBRZ) in Austria supports people who need to re-integrate into the labour market after an accident or illness. Almost 80% of the participants got back to work after the intervention. Additionally, participants experienced an increase in their self-confidence and were better able to manage their illness. The central vision of the programme is that together with re-entry to the labour market there is extra attention for support in the social and private areas of life, to increase the likelihood of success.

USP: Promoting re-integration across all aspects of life - social, work and private.

Serbia: Combination of formal and professional qualifications for the ROMA population

The Functional Basic Education of Adults (FBEA) programme has created a specific project for the Roma population in several cities in Serbia. The project is focused on those who did not finish primary school and do not have a professional qualification. Participants can obtain a formal qualification, and general, basic skills offers them new chances in the labour market. The programme is connected to the demands of the labour market and the certification and qualifications demanded for a profession. The participants are also offered the chance to obtain a professional qualification for a specific profession together with a primary school diploma. In this way the participants are able to supplement their education shortfall. Eventually, a significant number of the participants found a job and their employability increased.

USP: Combined approach in obtaining primary school diploma together with professional qualification.

Bulgaria: Differentiated cooperation between employment agency and centre for professional training

An intense 2-year cooperation between the Bulgarian Employment Agency and the Bulgarian-German centre for professional training, provided 4356 unemployed people with training and other programmes to better qualify for the labour market. Three kinds of training were provided - a profession focused orientation on professions where there is a high demand, professional qualifications for 'deprived' groups and key-competences development in basic skills, like language. Participation in these programmes allowed people to obtain a better place in the labour market and to find a job. This intensive cooperation succeeded in providing education for a lot of participants. Not only did profession-orientated training come first, but also basic skills were improved, so people could obtain a more solid place in the labour market. Importantly, the needs of the labour market were considered as well as those of the job seekers.

USP: Differentiated training possibilities by cooperation between employment agency and centre for professional training.

Finland: Investment of private sector in cooperation with public sector

In cooperation with the private sector, Finland has started the 'Social Impact Bonds'. In this initiative the private sector invests and takes a risk assisting immigrants to obtain a sustainable place in the labour market. A lot of immigrants have found a job through this initiative or will soon find their place in the labour market. The idea behind the project is to streamline the integration process for immigrants. A network will be created in which companies, immigrants and authorities work together. Participants are introduced to the labour market using various short courses, so flexibility comes first. When a participant finds a job, the Finnish government subsidises the private sector.

USP: Shared investment of public and private sector.

Slovenia: Facilitated short lasting practical training by employer

In Slovenia, the long-term unemployed, people with a disability, those above the age of 55 and people with no education, are assisted by employers through the provision of practical training in social entrepreneurship. The programme is called 'The Learning Workshops Project'. The training is financed by the Slovenian government in cooperation with the European Social Fund. The participants are offered practical training, lasting six months, in the area of social entrepreneurship. Employers facilitate this practical training where participants get involved in the work process of the employer. Here they are educated to gain work experience together with skills and knowledge. Eventually, the goal is for participants to be able to work independently.

USP: Combination of practical experience together with gaining knowledge and skills while at work.

The Netherlands 3: Trade academy: Training entrepreneurship in a specific trade

Through the Trade Academy in the Netherlands, new chances are created for people who want to work in a small-scale trade (e.g., bicycle repairer, ceramist, handyman, gold and silversmith, furniture maker or piano technician) as an entrepreneur. Apart from having sufficient general knowledge participants must successfully finish vocational education or at least have certifiable experience. For those above the age of 50 and unemployed there is the possibility to attend the training while retaining their benefits allowance. The training is developed by experienced entrepreneurs from the trades themselves and the participants are offered a master from the trade. Together with e-learning, the participants get to work in the company of the master and after successfully finishing the accompanying test, are able to work as an entrepreneur.

USP: Provided specialised training focusing on transfer of trade skills and knowledge in the labour market.

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Inclusion Measures within the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020: The Added Value of the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth

The principles of equality and inclusion are engrained in the European Union's core values, and the Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps are two major EU programmes that contribute to building inclusive and cohesive societies. In this context, the aim of the current study is to assess the contribution of the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth to the inclusion objectives of the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020, and the way the programme addressed its inclusion and diversity priorities during this period. To this purpose, the study examines the actions and measures taken, and the mechanisms and resources used by the Erasmus+ programme, by using a mix of analytical research methods and instruments.

The evaluation and research showed that although the Erasmus+ programme 2014-2020 has managed to significantly increase the participation of young people with fewer opportunities in Erasmus+ projects and to develop inclusion-related support instruments for Erasmus+ applicants and beneficiaries, there is a need for further expansion of access and inclusiveness in the future.

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Executive summary

This study, commissioned by the Ex-Post Evaluation Unit of the European Parliamentary Research Services (EPRS) at the request of the European Parliament Committee on Culture and Education (CULT), covers the inclusion measures within the EU Erasmus+ Programme between 2014 and 2020.

The aim of the study is to evaluate the contribution of the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth to the inclusion objectives of the Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020 and the way the Programme addressed (in terms of available support, actions and measures taken, mechanisms and resources, etc.) its inclusion and diversity priorities during this period.

The study includes the results obtained from pursuing two main research questions: 1) one, concerning the ways in which awareness, along with consolidated knowledge, about inclusion was raised by Erasmus + National Agencies (NAs) during the 2014-2020 period and 2) the other, concerning the ways in which the national inclusion and diversity strategies enhanced the inclusion approach of the Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth during the same period.

The first chapter presents the methodology and research questions pursued whereas the second chapter details the aims and context of the ERASMUS + Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth. Chapter 3 addresses inclusion and diversity and examines the support mechanisms and actions of stakeholders emerging from the survey results conducted with the NAs. Finally, Chapter 4 presents the conclusions of the study and a series of recommendations aimed at making the Erasmus+ Programme more inclusive in the future.

Overall, the study shows the major role played by National Agencies in supporting inclusive and diverse projects and their contribution towards strengthening the inclusion and diversity in the next generation of the Erasmus+ Programme 2021-2027 in the youth sector. National Agencies have effectively addressed the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ priorities and achieved European objectives by working closely with other bodies such as SALTOs (Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities) and the European Solidarity Corps, promoting awareness of the E+ Programme's opportunities, and developing inclusion and diversity plans based on overarching European principles and mechanisms.

Table of contents

Table of figures

Table of tables

Table of frequently used abbreviations and acronyms

CEFR Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

DG EAC Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture

DG EPRS Directorate-General for Parliamentary Research Services

EACEA European Education and Culture Executive Agency

EC European Commission

EIA European Implementation Assessment

EKCYP European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy

EPALE Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe

ESAA Erasmus Student Alumni Alliance

ESC European Solidarity Corps

ESF+ European Social Fund Plus

E+ Programme Erasmus+ Programme

EU European Union

EVS European Voluntary Service

EYP European Youth Portal

HE Higher Education

HEIs Higher Education Institutions

ID Inclusion and Diversity

ID Strategy Erasmus+ Youth Inclusion and Diversity Strategy

KA1 Erasmus+ Key Action 1

KA2 Erasmus+ Key Action 2

KA3 Erasmus+ Key Action 3

MOOC Massive Open Online Courses

NA(s) National Agency/Agencies

NEOs National Erasmus+ Offices

NEET Not in Education, Employment, or Training

OLS Online Linguistic Support

RAY Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of European Youth Programmes

REACT-EU Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe

SALTO Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities

SALTO ID	SALTO Inclusion & Diversity
SPI	Strategic Partnership on Inclusion
TCA	Transnational Cooperation Activities
YEI	Youth Employment Initiative

1. Short introduction

The current study has been drafted at the request of the DG EPRS (the Ex-Post Evaluation Unit) of the European Parliament in the context of the preparation of a European Implementation Assessment (EIA) on the inclusion measures within Erasmus+ 2014-2020. The EIA will support the work of the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education (CULT) on the matter.

1.1. Scope and content

The aim of the research is to assess the implementation of the inclusion measures within the Erasmus+ Programme in the period 2014-2020 concerning youth, with a focus on the Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth (ID Strategy hereafter) and its added value.

Specifically, the study sets out to assess the contribution of the ID Strategy, from an inclusion perspective, to the Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020 inclusion objectives by describing the added value of the ID Strategy, by highlighting the way the Programme responds to the ID Strategy's inclusion aims (the support available, the measures taken, etc.), and by underscoring the variety of ways in which the Strategy is supporting inclusion projects and strengthens inclusion within the Erasmus+ programme. Content-wise, the approach of the study follows closely the structure of the Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth that represents the focus of this study.

1.2. Research questions addressed

RQ1: How is awareness, along with consolidated knowledge, about inclusion raised by Erasmus + National Agencies?

RQ2: Within the context of EU trends affecting the most vulnerable people (young people with fewer opportunities), how are national inclusion and diversity strategies enhancing the inclusion approach of the Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth?

1.3. Methodology

The methodology of the study is grounded on the consultation of stakeholders, namely a survey addressed to the NAs and a comprehensive interview with SALTO Inclusion and Diversity Resource Centre (SALTO ID) in addition to a desk review of the Erasmus+ documents and comparative analysis of other relevant documents. More specifically, it has included (selectively):

- **31 Programme data**: *E+ Programme Guides, Annual Reports + Statistical Annexes* (2014-2020); *European solidarity corps,* Annual report 2018-2019, *Education and Training Monitor* publications 2016-2020; factsheets; Eurostat customisable datasets; monitoring surveys of beneficiaries, etc.<
- Existing data on Erasmus+ collected and elaborated at EU and national level: **Primary data collection**; **27 surveys** (Programme agencies surveys, such as by **EACEA**: *Erasmus+, Capacity building in higher education (CBHE) action. Survey report: impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of Erasmus+ CBHE projects; Erasmus+ Programme, Statistical factsheets on the achievements of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees (2014-2020)*; by **SALTO**: National Agencies' survey 2015(2015), by **European Commission**: *Combined evaluation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes; Synthesis of the National Authorities' Reports on the implementation and the impact of Erasmus+ (Volume 6)*(2017); **by National Agencies** (impact studies and annual NA reports);data on project evaluators and selection committees);
- Primary data collection consisting of **one survey** addressed to 53 Erasmus National Agencies and **one interview** with SALTO ID, carried out in the context of this study;
- **168 best practices** (Guides for good practices, such as: *Guide of good practices for the implementation of European mobility projects* (2018), websites, such as: Erasmus+ project results; European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYP); European Solidarity Corps

project platform; [SALTO Inclusion & Diversity](#); [School education gateway](#); [Eurodesk.eu](#); [European Youth Portal](#); [Youth Wiki](#), etc);

➜ **Literature review (243 sources)** general EU sources, articles, books, studies on impacts on stakeholders, participants, *Combined evaluations of Erasmus+ programmes* (2014-2020), etc.

1.4. Stakeholders' consultation

In order to assess the contribution of the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth to the inclusion objectives of the Erasmus+ Programme 2014 - 2020, this study has looked into the role of National Agencies and Resource Centers, as main implementing actors in addressing inclusion in the E+ Programme during this period. This section summarises the outcomes of the survey of NAs and the interview with SALTO ID that were conducted by the author from 03 June to 06 July 2021. The objective of the consultation was to gather the opinions and perspectives of these stakeholders to help assess the way they address inclusion and bring added value to the programme.

Survey of National Agencies

The survey consultation targeted all the NAs whose contact details list is to be found [here](#). A total number of 20 NAs responded from 18 countries (Portugal, Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Finland, Cyprus, Sweden, Spain, Turkey, Lichtenstein, Denmark and Croatia). The survey consisted in 12 questions (Annex 1), 2 of which were general identification questions and 10 were open inclusion-oriented questions. The responses came in the form of short narratives (some of which were more conceptual, others were more concrete proposals) underscoring the specific activities undertaken by each NA. These responses were processed and used throughout the current study to illustrate the specific actions taken by NAs to raise awareness and consolidated knowledge about inclusion among both staff and project applicants/participating organisations. While each of these specific actions is selectively illustrated by survey results emerging from this study, we have nonetheless drawn the following main conclusions.

Overall, under the 2014-2020 E+ Programme, the NAs have taken proactive steps to increase their support for groups of young workers and young participants with fewer opportunities.

To address inclusion more effectively, all responding NAs have participated in internal meetings/ presentations, workshops, training seminars and events organized by the EC and external stakeholders and have increased their institutional capacity to reach out to various vulnerable and disadvantaged groups via in service training, peer-learning activities, in cooperation with other NAs, and through regular consultation with HEIs (beneficiaries).

A number of 46 mentions of the ID Strategy across the surveyed NAs have rendered the document as highly significant for NAs' guided work on inclusion. Likewise, SALTO's work and resources were deemed by NAs respondents as a very important practical support provided to NAs' staff and their inclusion officers (17 mentions by 15 NAs).

SALTO ID Interview

The effectiveness and added value of SALTO ID and their inclusion supporting activities were explored using a combination of different methods (desktop research, and interview). The interview with the SALTO ID officer was held on June 17, 2021.

During the interview, a number of questions were asked concerning mainly: training offers provided between 2014 and 2020 by SALTO ID for youth workers (including NA staff) working with youth people with fewer opportunities; manuals and publications on inclusion offered by SALTO ID between 2014 and 2020; the role and activities of the Strategic Partnership for Inclusion; number of NAs (partners of SPI)that have already developed national inclusion and diversity strategies as a result of SALTO resources; training offers and activities dedicated by SALTO ID to

Erasmus + project evaluators and selection committees; social media activity of SALTO; inclusion activities of the ID Steering Group, etc.

The responses provided during the interview were corroborated with the desk research and led us to draw the following conclusions:

SALTO ID's supporting work on inclusion is very important as it assists NAs and youth workers in their inclusion efforts by providing training, by developing youth work methods, and disseminating information via publications and newsletters.

By providing such opportunities for training, exchange, and reflection on inclusion practice and diversity management, SALTO ID contributes to making the inclusion of youth with fewer opportunities and positive diversity management a widely supported priority while increasing the visibility, accessibility, and transparency of its inclusion work and resources.

2. The Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth

Throughout its activities, the Erasmus+ Programme (hereinafter referred to as the E+ Programme) aims to advance equal opportunity and access, as well as inclusion, diversity, and fairness.

2.1. Context and aims of the ID Strategy

Organisations and participants with fewer opportunities are central to the Erasmus+ objectives, and the programme provides mechanisms and resources to support them. Organisations are expected to take an inclusive approach when developing their projects and activities and to allow them to be accessed by a diverse range of participants. To put these principles into practice, the Erasmus+ Youth Inclusion and Diversity Strategy (hereinafter referred to as the ID Strategy) covers all programme areas and was developed to facilitate funding access for a wider array of organisations and engage with more participants with fewer opportunities. The ID Strategy seeks to assist in overcoming the obstacles that various target groups of individuals may encounter in accessing such opportunities both within and outside of Europe. It was launched in 2014 and acknowledged that obstacles (or difficulties) young people may encounter include disability, economic and educational barriers, cultural differences, health issues as well as social and geographical barriers.

The ID Strategy highlights the following identified needs:

1   'Create a **common understanding** of those who may be considered as young people with fewer opportunities and a coherent framework of support for the E+ programme feature 'Equity and Inclusion'.
2   Increase the **commitment** to inclusion and diversity from different actors in Erasmus+: Youth in Action.
3   Promote Erasmus+: Youth in Action as a **tool to work with young people with fewer opportunities** and actively reach out to disadvantaged groups.
4   **Reduce obstacles** for young people with fewer opportunities to participate in the programme and help applicants to overcome obstacles.
5   Support organisers in developing **quality projects** that involve or benefit young people with fewer opportunities (e.g. provide training, tools, funding, coaching etc.).
6   Link where relevant to **other initiatives** that benefit young people with fewer opportunities – both cooperation with other sectors (joined-up, cross-sectoral approach) as well as for youth policy and projects at local, national and international levels**.**
7   Invest in the **intercultural and social skills** of young people and youth workers as well as their competences to manage and work with diversity in all its forms.
8   Increase the **recognition** of the experience and skills gained by young people with fewer opportunities in Erasmus+ and by the youth workers working with them.
9   Ensure that the focus on inclusion and diversity is present in **all stages of Erasmus+: Youth in Action management**, including promotion, support for applicants, selection of projects and evaluation and dissemination of project outcomes.'[1]

The ID Strategy was intended to make a major impact on young participants/individuals with fewer opportunities and at the same time to secure that the E+ Programme becomes a lever for positive change and provide a constructive response to diversity and inclusion in the field of

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[1]   Inclusion and *Diversity Strategy for Youth*, (p.7-8).

Youth. Likewise, the inclusion approach put forward by Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013[2] encourages, at both national and European levels, the access and involvement of youngsters with fewer opportunities and/or disadvantaged backgrounds in the E+ Programme (Art. 23(2)).

2.2. Understanding Inclusion and Diversity

Inclusion and diversity are two multi-dimensional intertwining concepts that are often used in connection with equity, fairness and equality of opportunity. Diversity concerns the condition of being different (or varied) and depends on the cultural context and awareness level of difference. As awareness about different dimensions of diversity has widened, inclusion has come to mean embracing this diversity and working to integrate under-represented, disadvantaged or vulnerable groups (or any combination of these three) into the community and/or society.

There is no widely, one-fits-all, accepted definition of young people with fewer opportunities but they are generally considered to be young people who, 'for various economic, social, cultural, geographical, or health reasons, or for reasons such as disability or educational difficulties, or for any other reason, including one that would constitute discrimination, face obstacles that prevent them from exercising their rights'[3]. To best meet the needs of participants with fewer opportunities and to assist organisations working with these target groups in their national contexts, the ID Strategy was developed to facilitate funding for a broader range of organisations and to reach out to a greater number of participants with fewer opportunities.

The ID Strategy embraces inclusion and diversity as a pro-active approach that fosters a culture in which young people are valued and respected. While diversity values and embraces the differences between people, inclusion looks at fostering an environment in which diversity can thrive. In this sense, inclusion and diversity projects of the E+ Programme are expected to: 1) achieve a measureable positive effect on the young and vulnerable people who have fewer opportunities[4] and are at disadvantage over their peers, and 2) to embrace diversity so that variation and difference are celebrated as sources for constructive learning rather than the roots for prejudice and negative competition. The Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 describes the individuals who have fewer opportunities as 'people facing obstacles that prevent them from having effective access to opportunities under the Programme for economic, social, cultural, geographical or health reasons, a migrant background or for reasons such as disability and educational difficulties'[5]. It is possible to be disadvantaged in a variety of ways and young people might find themselves in not one but in several situations that hinder their participation in employment, education, mobility programmes, and in society at large. The ID Strategy identifies a number of obstacles or difficulties that young people may encounter and classifies them as follows:

- '**Disability** (i.e. participants with special needs): young people with mental (intellectual, cognitive, learning), physical, sensory or other disabilities, etc.
- **Health problems**: young people with chronic health problems, severe illnesses or psychiatric conditions, etc.
- **Educational difficulties**: young people with learning difficulties, early school leavers, lower qualified persons, young people with poor school performance, etc.

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[2]   Regulation (EU) No1288/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December2013 establishing 'Erasmus+': the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport and repealing Decisions No 1719/2006/EC, No 1720/2006/EC and No 1298/2008/EC, O.J. L 347 of 20.12.2013.

[3]   Based on the definitions of the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth, (p.7-8).

[4]   As described in the 2019 Erasmus+ Programme Guide, p 10. In: http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus/files/files/resources/erasmus-plus-programme-guide_en.pdf(accessed 24/04/2021)

[5]   Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 p. 3 (in: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013R1288&from=EN – accessed 21/04/2021)

- **Cultural differences**: immigrants, refugees or descendants from immigrant or refugee families, young people belonging to a national or ethnic minority, young people with linguistic adaptation and cultural inclusion difficulties, etc.
- **Economic obstacles**: young people with a low standard of living, low income, dependence on social welfare system, young people in long-term unemployment or poverty, young people who are homeless, in debt or with financial problems, etc.
- **Social obstacles**: young people facing discrimination because of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability, etc., young people with limited social skills or anti-social or high-risk behaviours, young people in a precarious situation, (ex-offenders, (ex-) drug or alcohol abusers, young and/or single parents, orphans, in social care, etc.
- **Geographical obstacles**: young people from remote or rural areas, young people living on small islands or in peripheral regions, young people from urban problem zones, young people from less serviced areas (limited public transport, poor facilities), etc'[6].

As seen above, the sources of disadvantage and exclusion can be multiple and often vary according to country and context. Occasionally also, the categories may overlap. 'Psychiatric conditions' can certainly result in 'learning difficulties' and do not always fall under the category of 'special needs'. Likewise, the term 'disadvantage' does not typically carry the same legal weight as 'discrimination'. As a result, European perceptions of disadvantage do not automatically translate into the diverse legal and cultural contexts of the European Union's (EU) Member States. Therefore, while the E+ Programme requires participating organisations to adhere to the principles of non-discrimination and to promote and ensure equal access and opportunity for people from all backgrounds, particularly disadvantaged or vulnerable groups, the implementation of the ID Strategy has been highly dependent on various understandings of the term.

A series of other obstacles that young people face are the systemic and contextual obstacles that are more related to programme management and implementation than to the particular individual[7]. Indeed, the underlying factors of non-participation are most often not those specifically related to the individual person, but rather to the environment in which the youth live in and the manner in which the programmes are applied. Therefore, young people may believe that the formats and programme interventions are not tailored to their needs and may often lack the confidence to try to access the programmes. In addition, youth organisations may have constrained access to the programmes, either because they lack expertise in international mobility, or because their workforce has restricted capabilities to participate in the project (due to their lack of project management experience, incapacity to find partners, etc.). To overcome all these obstacles, the focus of inclusion for young participants with fewer opportunities has thus shifted more clearly towards the support that should be offered at a contextual, systemic level. Such a support, while being active and adequate enough to cover almost all of the needs and specificities of young people, would also allow for a better focus narrowed in accordance with national complexities and priorities (that can be identified via national inclusion strategies within the programme framework and in combination with the national activities planners).

In this regard, the SALTO Inclusion and Diversity Resource Centre, a structure that supports the activity of the Erasmus National Agencies (see more information on this under 3.1), has focused on the following disadvantaged groups[8]:

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[6]   The ID Strategy (p.7)

[7]   As laid out in ID Beyond 2020, elaborated by SALTO Inclusion and Diversity on the basis of inputs from sources such as the European Expert Seminar on more inclusive future European youth programme organised by the German National Agency for the Erasmus+ Programme – Mainz, Germany 24-24 April 2019, reflections from the Inclusion and Diversity Colleague Support Group and from the Steering Group of the Erasmus+ Inclusion Strategy that took place in March 2019.

[8]   Source: ID Beyond 2020, (p.7).

> ➤ 'Working on the empowerment of women, and more specifically of young ethnic minority women;
> ➤ Setting up meaningful international youth projects with young people in disadvantaged (sub)urban areas;
> ➤ Researching social challenges faced by young people in (sub)urban areas and analysing a variety of urban interventions to extract criteria for success;
> ➤ Providing guidance on how to set up international youth projects, for and with rural youngsters, in geographically remote and disadvantaged areas;
> ➤ Exploring how to work with young offenders, ex-offenders and young people at risk of offending or currently in prison;
> ➤ Discovering how to work with LesBiGay youth in a respectful and helpful way and how to set up international youth projects;
> ➤ Stimulating the participation of young people with a disability in international youth projects - promoting mixed-ability projects;
> ➤ Exploring the links between youth employment and social exclusion;
> ➤ Keeping track of different approaches to young people in NEET[9]situation'.

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[9]   NEET is used as an acronym for 'Not in Education, Employment, or Training' and indicates a young person who is no longer in school and is not working or being trained for work.

3. Inclusion in the Erasmus + Programme

3.1. Understanding the Erasmus+ Programme

The E+ Programme 2014-2020 was designed to assist Programme Countries[10] in maximising the potential of Europe's social and human capital, by reaffirming the lifelong learning principle through support for formal, non-formal, and informal learning across the education, training, and youth sectors[11]. It continued a 25-year tradition of European programmes (including Tempus, Erasmus Mundus, or the Youth in Action Programme, etc.) in pertinent fields, while also providing support for grassroots sports. 'The specific objectives pursued by the Erasmus+ Programme in the field of education and training are to:

- improve the level of key competences and skills, with particular regard to their relevance for the labour market and their contribution to a cohesive society, in particular through increased opportunities for learning mobility and through strengthened cooperation between the world of education and training and the world of work;
- foster quality improvements, innovation excellence and internationalisation at the level of education and training institutions, in particular through enhanced transnational cooperation between education and training providers and other stakeholders;
- promote the emergence and raise awareness of a European lifelong learning area designed to complement policy reforms at national level and to support the modernisation of education and training systems, in particular through enhanced policy cooperation, better use of EU transparency and recognition tools and the dissemination of good practices;
- enhance the international dimension of education and training, in particular through cooperation between Programme and Partner-Country institutions in the field of VET and in higher education, by increasing the attractiveness of European higher education institutions and supporting the EU's external action, including its development objectives, through the promotion of mobility and cooperation between Programme and Partner Country higher education institutions and targeted capacity building in Partner Countries;
- improve the teaching and learning of languages and promote the EU's broad linguistic diversity and intercultural awareness'. (*Source*: **Erasmus + Programme Guide 2020**, p 27).

Major areas

In what concerns **education and training,** the E+ Programme provides educational opportunities for pre-university, vocational, tertiary and adult education, whereas Jean Monnet (which is an Erasmus+ initiative that promotes teaching, learning, research, and debates about various aspects of the EU) provides support for European studies with the assistance of higher education institutions (HEIs). For the field of **youth**, the E+ Programme provides opportunities for the young. The **sport** sector is centered on sport and significant international cooperative initiatives or events.

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[10]   https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/who-can-take-part_en

[11]   The E+ Programme 2014-2020 aided in the accomplishment of the following objectives: 'the objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, including the headline education target[11]; the objectives of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), including the corresponding benchmarks; the sustainable development of Partner Countries in the field of higher education (HE); the overall objectives of the EU Youth Strategy (framework for European cooperation in the youth field); the objective of developing the European dimension in sport, in particular grassroots sport, in line with the European Union (EU) work plan for sport; the promotion of European values in accordance with Article 2 of the Treaty on the European Union' (Source: Erasmus + Programme Guide 2020, p.7).

Key Actions

Support opportunities within the E+ Programme are divided into three primary actions:

Key Action 1 (KA1): Mobility of individuals. This Key Action is devoted specifically to the international learning mobility of individuals or groups, with the primary objective of enabling and enhancing participants' learning.

Key Action 2 (KA2): Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices. This Key Action is intended to foster strategic and long-term collaboration between partners from various countries with the goal of fostering innovation, achieving sustainable results, and advancing the overall development of structures and policies in the sectors of education, training, and youth in Europe.

Key Action 3 (KA3): Support for policy reform. This Key Action aims to support policy reform in the fields of education, training, and youth in Europe, with a particular emphasis on the achievement of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020), and the European Youth Strategy's objectives.

Implementing actors of the E+ Programme

The European Commission (EC) is responsible for the Erasmus+ Programme in its entirety. The European Commission's Executive Agency for Education, Audiovisual and Culture (EACEA) is responsible for managing the Erasmus+ Programme's centralised actions.

A significant sector of the Erasmus+ Programme is managed de-centrally by the National Agencies (NAs) in each of the Erasmus+ Programme Countries. In the EU Member States, the Commission delegates much of the management of Erasmus+ to National Agencies, but outside the EU, and particularly in the field of HE, the National Erasmus+ Office[12] (NEOs) fill this role.

The two main 'actors' involved in the implementation of the Erasmus+ Programme and whose contributions have informed this study are the National Agencies, as the implementing body of Erasmus+ Programme and SALTO YOUTH, as a supporting structure.

National Agencies

The NAs[13] manage the selection of projects and provide information and assistance to Programme beneficiaries and those interested in applying for project grants. The European Commission funds the NAs which in turn administer the program's 'decentralized' activities. This enables the NAs to tailor the programme to their respective national systems of education, training, and youth.

The NAs are accountable for the following:

- Disseminating information about the programme;
- Examining applications submitted to them in their home country;
- Monitoring and evaluating the programme's implementation in their country;
- Assisting individuals and organisations participating in Erasmus+;
- Increasing awareness of the program and its activities on a local and national level;
- Additionally, NAs assist beneficiaries of the programme both throughout the application process and throughout the duration of a project.
- Likewise, NAs collaborate with beneficiaries and other organisations to advance EU policy in areas covered by the program.

SALTO YOUTH Resource Centers

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[12] A list of NEOs can be found here:
https://wayback.archive-it.org/12090/20210122013205/https:/eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/contacts/national-erasmus-plus-offices_en

[13] A number of 33 countries have Erasmus +National Agencies. A list of NAs can be found here:
https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/contact/national-agencies_en

SALTO-YOUTH stands for Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for Youth. It consists of seven [SALTO YOUTH](#) Resource Centres which assist NAs and other stakeholders in ensuring the quality of Erasmus+ Youth in Action projects and in advancing European youth work and youth policies. Each of the seven Resource Centres is devoted to a particular subject or serves a region. They are all based at different National Erasmus+ and [European Solidarity Corps Agencies](#). These Resource Centres are:

'[SALTO Inclusion & Diversity](#) (Belgium-Flanders);
[SALTO Participation & Information](#) (Estonia);
[SALTO Training and Cooperation](#) (Germany);
[SALTO Eastern Europe and Caucasus](#) (Poland);
[SALTO EuroMed](#) (France);
[SALTO South-East Europe](#) (Slovenia);
[European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre](#) (Austria)'.[14]

As regards inclusion in EU youth programmes, an active role and contribution is made by [SALTO Inclusion & Diversity](#) (SALTO ID), which is a Resource Centre[15] that provides resources (training tools, publications, and information) to assist young people with fewer opportunities in gaining access to [Erasmus+ Youth in Action](#) and [European Solidarity Corps](#)[16](ESC), as well as to organisations that work with them. Additionally, SALTO ID helps youth workers and organisations maximize their personal and organisational capacities, preparing them to develop more inclusive projects.

3.2. Youth, inclusion and diversity in the Erasmus+ Programme

Addressing the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals has always been the European Union's focal point in the youth sector, most distinctly through grant support for organisations and youngsters operating in this field.

Erasmus+ Youth in Action is the name given to activities within the E+ Programme that focus on youth. It provides numerous opportunities for young people, youth workers, and youth policymakers to collaborate, develop skills, and take a proactive role in building a sustainable and democratic European society. Along with the Programme's overarching objectives, Erasmus+ Youth in Action serves as a critical instrument for implementing the [European Union's Youth Strategy 2010–2018](#). Launched in 2009, the EU Youth Strategy Cooperation Framework defines eight priority areas of cooperation and establishes the following general objectives:

'to provide more equal opportunities for all young people in education and the labour market; and to promote active citizenship, social inclusion and solidarity among all young people.'[17].

The Erasmus+ Programme in the youth sector has operated as an instrument to reach its diversity and inclusion goals, inter alia equal justice[18], equal access to opportunities, teamwork and partnership, an emphasis on innovation and imagination, organisational versatility[19], a commitment to diversity by leadership, diversity inclusion at all levels of the organisation, and diversity education and training.

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[14]   More about SALTO YOUTH Resource Centers can be found here: https://www.salto-youth.net/about/

[15]   SALTO Inclusion and Diversity is one of the seven **SALTO YOUTH** Resource centers that are working within the Erasmus+ Youth and the European Solidarity Corps programmes.

[16]   European Solidarity Corps is a youth engagement programme. More about the mission and principles of ESC can be found here: https://europa.eu/youth/solidarity/mission_en

[17]   https://europa.eu/youth/strategy/strategy-2010-2018_en

[18]   Both equality and justice illustrate egalitarianism and justice. True justice cannot exist in the absence of equality.

[19]   A versatile organisation is that organisation that is adaptable to changes in its operating environment and can rapidly organize resources in order to successfully deliver products or services that meet market needs or respond to market changes.

The EU Youth in Action is the programme put in place between 2007 and 2013 by the European Union for young people that **precedes** the Erasmus+ 2014-2020 Programme. The difference between the old EU Youth in Action (2007-2013) and the following (new) Erasmus+ Youth in Action is illustrated in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Overview of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes in youth

Programme	Key objectives	Main actions	C	D
Erasmus+	Promoting the level of key competences and skills of young people;	Mobility of young people (KA1)	●	●
	Promoting participation in democratic life in Europe and the labour market, active citizenship, etc.;	Mobility of youth workers (KA1)		●
	Fostering quality improvements in youth work; Complementing policy reforms at local, regional and national level;	Cooperation actions (KA2)	●	●
	Enhancing the international dimension of youth activities	System-level actions (KA3)	●	
Youth in Action programme	Promoting young people's active citizenship; Developing solidarity and promoting tolerance;	Mobility of young people	●	●
	Fostering mutual understanding between young people in different countries;	Mobility of youth workers	●	●
	Developing the quality of support systems for youth activities and youth organisations;	Cooperation actions	●	●
	Promoting European cooperation in the youth field;	System-level actions	●	●

Source: ICF[20.] C= centralised action (run by EACEA) and D=decentralised action (run by NAs)

The preceding EU Youth in Action (for the 2007-2013 period) had a budget of € 885 million[21]. With the Erasmus+ Programme, about 60% more funds have been earmarked for youth projects compared to the previous programme. Thus, with a EUR 14.7 billion budget allocated for the period 2014-2020 in the sectors of training, education, sports, and youth, the E+ Programme has enabled over 4 million people to study, volunteer, exchange good practices, train or work in another country[22].

Within the E+ Programme, inclusion and diversity projects are considered to be those that: 1) include young individuals with fewer opportunities who directly carry out the project (and thus

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[20] Combined evaluation of Erasmus+ and predecessor programmes. Final report : main evaluation report (Volume 1), 2017, p.30.

[21] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISSUM:c11080

[22] Source:https://ec.europa.eu/info/education/set-projects-education-and-training/erasmus-funding-programme_en

provide for them tailored assistance, project development as well as post project support); 2) actively involve young participants with fewer opportunities in the core project activities as direct beneficiaries; and 3) address specific inclusion and diversity issues whose beneficiaries are the young individuals with fewer opportunities even though they have no direct affiliation with the project itself.

The significance of providing all participants equal and fair opportunities, in particular those belonging to under-represented groups, is underscored in Article 23 of Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 that establishes the E+ Programme: 'when implementing the Programme, *inter alia* as regards the selection of participants and the award of scholarships, the Commission and the Member States shall ensure that particular efforts are made to promote social inclusion and the participation of people with special needs or with fewer opportunities.'[23]

Viewed from a youth perspective, social inclusion

> *'is the process by which an individual realizes his or her potential within a society, is accepted and recognized by social institutions, and is integrated (through study, employment, volunteer work, or other forms of participation) into the web of social relations within a community. It has a special significance for young people who come from impoverished backgrounds and live in precarious circumstances. Social inclusion, for them, entails overcoming numerous obstacles en route to acquiring their social rights as full members of society'[24].*

Social inclusion represents thus a top priority in the E+ Programme 'in accordance with the Paris Declaration, to the new priority areas of the strategic framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training (Education and Training 2020) and the Youth Strategy or the New Skills Strategy for Europe.'[25]The increasing concern for social inclusion within EU's more targeted inclusion and diversity policies has enabled E+ Programme to welcome new projects that encourage inter alia media literacy, critical thinking, initiative among young people, engagement of marginalised youth, promotion of diversity and of intercultural, inter-ethnic and inter-confessional dialogue as well as the acquisition of skills and methods by youngsters and youth workers that are necessary for the transfer of the society's basic values, in particular, tolerance, freedom, and respect for human rights. Likewise, within the present-day situation in Europe concerning migration, the Erasmus+ Programme actively encourages youth mobility projects that involve or targets migrants, refugees as well as asylum-seekers.

3.3. Support mechanisms for inclusion and diversity

The following features and mechanisms were used by the E+ Programme 2014-2020 to support and foster inclusion and diversity:

3.3.1. Programme accessibility

The Erasmus+ Programme tried to take a user-friendly approach by making programme instructions, implementation and reporting processes, as well as documentation and forms, more concise, descriptive, and understandable. This has involved the use of diverse languages and various formats where possible, as well as maintaining the usability and functionality of multimedia learning environments. Several digital networks (e.g., eTwinning, EPALE, the European

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[23] Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013, p. 15 (in: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013R1288&from=EN – accessed 03/05/2021)

[24] As per definition available at: https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/social-inclusion- accessed 14.06.2021.

[25] According to the mid-term evaluation report of the Erasmus+ Programme (2014-2020) p.2 (in https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC00-accessed 04.05.2021).

Youth Portal, the School Education Gateway and the Erasmus+ Mobile App) have thus eased access for all users, in particular for those who were in need of single and more structured online points of access to include all the information and services they needed. According to a recent report[26], in general, project participants and project leaders reported they were 'satisfied with the application process and administrative management of the E+ Youth in Action programme projects, with a combined *agree* and *strongly agree* response rate above 80%'.

3.3.2. Accessible project formats

Short-term and small-scale mobility experiences (e.g. *Youth Exchanges*, *European Voluntary Services*, *Transnational Youth Initiatives* within *Strategic Partnerships*, etc.) have served as a first experience for individuals from vulnerable groups, with disadvantaged backgrounds and with fewer opportunities who were unable to participate or who felt unprepared for a typical mobility period due to their own circumstances. A first experience has encouraged these groups to consider participating in longer-term and larger-scale projects as a next step. Additionally, social tasks have been often supplemented by participatory events, and through participating in online mobility programmes. Numerous project formats have proven to be relatively simple to navigate for novices and inclusion groups, in particular the instances when short-term physical mobility experiences could be paired with multimedia, virtual interactions. Likewise, with *Open Applications*, a project grant can be applied for even if the participants have not been selected beforehand. In such cases, a clear specification of the young persons' profile(s) benefitting from the project suffices during the application process but enables the applicant, once the project is funded, to further customise the project to the specific needs of the chosen group(s) of young participants with fewer opportunities.

Other available project formats that have been used as support features for the E+ Programme 2014-2020 and fostered new collaborations and impacted youth practice and policy are[27]: *Strategic Partnerships* (KA2) in the sector of youth that have enabled the implementation of activities aimed at professionalizing and developing youth work practices across Europe. Likewise, *Preparatory Visits* have assisted in providing personalised support and in assessing the individual needs of participants, including those belonging to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. These visits have enhanced the mutual understanding, trust and the strong partnership between organisations and have allowed for a better integration of the youth into the design and activities of the projects. In addition to all this, *Structured Dialogue*, another E+ Programme opportunity for organisations, has successfully increased youth's active involvement in democratic life and has fostered debate about major issues confronting today's young population. Youth-led activities (e.g. national, transnational, or international events, consultations, meetings or seminars) have engaged decision makers and young people in dialogue to avail the development of sector policies.

3.3.3. Extra financial assistance

A number of budget elements have been introduced to enable Erasmus+ projects to accommodate individuals with fewer opportunities to cover the additional costs associated with inclusion and diversity:

➤ additional funds to offset the costs associated with the special needs of learners who have less chances to participate on an equal basis with their peers, such as costs associated with adapted travel and lodging (visa costs, expenses incurred by a personal nurse, rentals of assistive devices, extra medical coverage for project duration), mentorship and coaching, personal support, or/and particular language preparation;

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[26]   RAY MON Report, (p.43).

[27]   ID Strategy , (p.9).

- supplementary financial support for youth organisations that conduct projects actively promoting inclusion and diversity, in particular for involving hard-to-reach disadvantaged groups;
- a streamlined and more efficient funding process to assist smaller-size youth organisations with little or no previous experience in the application submission process under the E+ Programme;
- straightforward and flexible financial mechanisms, with a view to better suit the needs at the national level of each target group and to accommodate potential synergies with other European funds.

3.3.4. Language support

Various categories of Erasmus+ participants (e.g. newly arriving refugees, members of national or racial minorities, sign language participants, individuals experiencing problems with linguistic adaptation, etc.) may be limited in their Programme participation as language proficiency has often been cited as an obstacle to participation in all programmes, in particular mobility programmes[28]. This is why language learning opportunities have been provided in conjunction with mobility activities. Language assistance has been offered through Erasmus+ Online Language Support[29], available for all European languages or in alternative formats (e.g. sign language) whenever online education has not been the most effective method of reaching the target audiences. Yearly, between 2014 and 2020, well over 350,000 Erasmus+ young participants tested their language proficiency by using the Online Language Support (OLS) platform and have improved their language skills through the OLS language courses. Of these, under KA3, to assist Member States in integrating refugees into the educational and training systems of Europe, 'the Erasmus+ OLS —provided to Erasmus+ participants — was extended to approximately 100,000 refugees through the 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 Calls.'[30] On average, 'participants who follow courses actively improve their proficiency by at least one CEFR level (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).'[31]

3.3.5. Virtual exchanges

As a complementary option to Erasmus+ physical mobility, online exchanges, such as the Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, are designed to enhance traditional mobility programmes and enable participants — including individual(s) with fewer opportunities — to benefit from intercultural and international experience. By leveraging the power of technology, such programming has the potential to join a significant diversity of people in relevant cross-cultural learning experiences. Owing to its open and inclusive nature, it has provided (as illustrated by the figure above) relevant skill-building and life-changing experience to youngsters who would

Figure 1: Participation in Virtual Exchanges
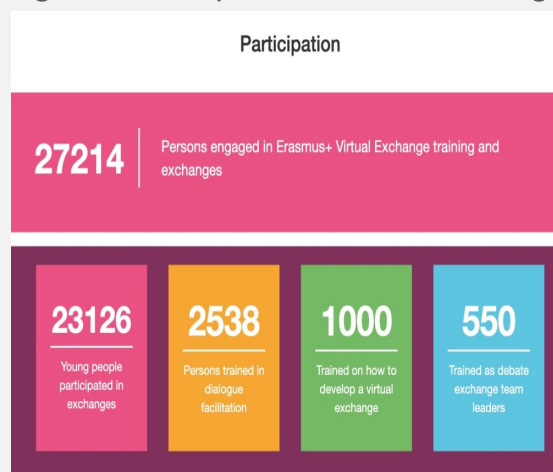
Source: https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/impact-erasmus-virtual-exchange_en

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[28] See for example, Souto-Otero, M. et al., Barriers to International Student Mobility Evidence from the Erasmus Program, in Educational Researcher. 42. 2013, p.72 which listslack of the ability to speak a foreign language as an important barrier to participation.

[29] Erasmus + Online Linguistic Support (OLS), available at: https://erasmusplusols.eu/en/

[30] According to the Erasmus Plus Programme Guide 2020, (p 9).

[31] https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/resources/online-linguistic-support_en

have been excluded otherwise. Within a wide reach, within and outside the European borders[32], it has facilitated blended learning, provided different formats, models and activity types and has managed to bridge cultural divides by exposing youths to a wide range of alternative world views and mindsets.

3.3.6. Recognition

Certification of competences can be particularly beneficial for young participants with fewer opportunities, including NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) individuals[33], who are looking for work. To this purpose, the Youthpass has been used as the EU-wide instrument for identifying and documenting informal as well as non-formal learning outcomes achieved by participants in Erasmus+ youth projects. It has been constantly enhanced to incorporate the revised key competences and to serve Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships[34] and Transnational Youth Initiatives[35] beginning in spring2019, as well as European Solidarity

Figure 2: Youthpass in numbers

Overview of Youthpass in numbers			
Year	Certificates	Projects	Organisations
Total	1.106.265	70.970	27.989

Source: https://www.youthpass.eu/en/about-youthpass/statistics/

Corps[36] projects beginning mid-2019. Since 2007, when it was launched, well over 1 million of certificates have been issued to young people involved in youth programmes (see figure above).

3.3.7. Reinforced Mentorship

The ID Strategy suggested the benefits of Reinforced Mentorship for the young participants with fewer opportunities in the E+ Programme. The Reinforced Mentorship term is an intensive mentoring process that helps individuals encountering various obstacles to implement activities, to benefit from valuable contact, regular meetings, increased autonomy and longer time spent on task implementation. This approach ensures that participants receive a gradual support throughout and beyond project activities and is particularly relevant for jobs, volunteering and traineeships. Under the E+ Programme, the Reinforced Mentorship was offered within the European Voluntary Service (EVS) between 2014 and 2018, and since 2018, by the European Solidarity Corps.

3.3.8. Increased role of organisations in Inclusion and Diversity projects

NAs, supported by Resource Centres, such as SALTO ID, have a key role in achieving inclusion, especially in capacity building, in the multiplication of inclusion projects and initiatives across the organisation as well as in increasing interaction with participants in project activities. The E+

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[32]   Based on information available at: https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/impact-erasmus-virtual-exchange_en (accessed 15.06.2021)

[33]   As young people who are disengaged from both the labour market and education and training systems, NEETs have gained increasing attention largely because they are considered to face long-term disadvantages.

[34]   Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships in the field of youth (under KA2) enable the implementation of activities aimed at professionalizing and developing youth work practices across Europe.

[35]   Transnational Youth Initiatives is a KA2 Strategic Partnerships activity in the field of youth development that fosters social commitment and entrepreneurial spirit by enhancing participants' creativity and stimulating consultations and discussions about issues and challenges confronting the local communities in which they live.

[36]   The European Solidarity Corps draws on the success of well over 25 years of European volunteer and youth programmes, most notably the EVS, and aims to strengthen European society by engaging youth in reachable and meaningful solidarity activities.

Programme formats and supporting structures have allowed for various organisational approaches to diversity and inclusion. Various types of support, including but not limited to training seminars, peer learning experiences, and job shadowing sessions and opportunities, have facilitated inclusion capacity development, promotion as well as awareness-raising of social inclusion and diversity. The survey addressed to NAs within the current research project indicates that all respondents organised support activities for the E+ Programme 2014-2020[37]. As a result of such activities, youth organisations have intensified their role in raising awareness about the various opportunities and support mechanisms available. For example, the European Youth Portal lists a number of 7,425 youth organisations that facilitate application for direct funding within the Solidarity Projects calls. In addition to this, the effect of projects on organisations/networks of project participants and project leaders is quite significant according to a recent RAY[38] report which indicates that 'project participants and project leaders learned better how to foster participation of young people in the preparation and implementation of (youth) projects (87% of project participants in Mobility of Youth Workers (KA1) and 82% of project participants in Transnational Cooperation Activities (TCA) and, 94% of project leaders)'. These developments are bolstered by participants' actual involvement in the project's planning and implementation, as reported by 86 % of participants, which provided an opportunity for them to practice actual participation[39]. Additionally, youth organisations, according to the same report, became more receptive to youth participation, inclusion of youth with fewer opportunities, and engagement in European issues.

The increased role of these organisations in fostering inclusion and diversity projects under the E+ Programme has been visible at the following levels:

Cooperation and networking

The training opportunities provided by the E+ Programme have been designed to strengthen not only the organisational capacity to run qualitative projects promoting inclusion and diversity but also the potential of organisations to establish networks of trusted partners. Such cooperation and networking activities have been facilitated by the National Agencies, supported by Resource Centres, such as SALTO, as well as virtual platforms that include eTwinning, EPALE, the School Education Gateway, etc. (For more examples of cooperation and networking activities see 3.5.).

Outreach

Youth organisations play a significant role in raising awareness about the various opportunities and support mechanisms available. A recent report[40] indicates that '55% of E+ Youth in Action project participants got to know about their project through a youth organisation/association (37%), an informal youth group (11%) or a youth centre (7%)'.NAs, SALTO Resource Centres and other stakeholders working with under-represented groups at local/regional levels have thus played a major role in providing information to these groups. Among concrete strategies and measures that have been used to address people with fewer opportunities are the following:

➤ Testimonials provided by former participants with fewer opportunities, ambassadors and alumni networks. Organisations such as the Erasmus Student Alumni Alliance (ESAA), the Erasmus Ambassadors, the EuroPeers, and platforms such as OTLAS among others, have

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[37]   These results emerge from the survey of NAs conducted by the author between June 03 and July 06, 2021.
    For more survey results, see Section 3.4.

[38]   RAY reports are research-based analyses related to the European Youth Programmes. The RAY-MON research report summarises the transnational analysis of the results from surveys conducted between October 2019 and June 2020 with project participants and project teams involved in Erasmus+ Youth in Action projects (p.26).

[39]   Ibid.

[40]   RAY MON Report 2019-2020, (p.43).

successfully assisted in promoting the programme actions and calls to people with fewer opportunities by sharing their own experiences with peers, friends, organisation staff;

➤ Targeted promotional and dissemination materials and publications prepared in different languages (sign language included), and in adjusted formats, such as Braille, and containing information on opportunities for people with fewer opportunities;

➤ Traditional face-to-face events (info-days) with targeted participants with fewer opportunities.

Support throughout project stages

Within the E+ Programme framework, interested youth organisations or/and groups of young people can apply for positions in one of the following categories:

➤ Coordinator of a youth mobility project - accountable for submitting applications on behalf of all participants;

➤ Sending Organisations- an organisation tasked with the responsibility of sending youth and/or youth workers abroad.

➤ Receiving Organisations - tasked with the responsibility of hosting, developing an activity program for participants, and providing support.

On behalf of all project participants, any organisation established in a Programme Country may apply. Under the E+ Programme 2014-2020, applicant youth organisations have provided support for under-represented groups prior to, during, and following their projects experience. According to the RAY-MON 2019-2020 transnational analysis, '71% of project leaders reporting to be involved in YE, EVS or SD/YD stated that young people with fewer opportunities or with special needs participated in their project (Structured Dialogue 81%, Youth Exchanges 71%, European Voluntary Service 53%'.[41] Participants with fewer opportunities have been assisted with various administrative tasks (registration, documents, reports, etc.) in view of programme admission and throughout projects duration. Activities have been tailored to their needs, e.g. through the use of inclusive learning environments, inclusive teaching and learning methodologies or accompanying persons during mobility. The direct involvement of project participants (participants from disadvantaged groups included) in applicant youth organisations under the E+ Programme has also had a significant effect concerning the way in which the E+ Youth in Action projects are aligned with the objectives and priorities of the E+ Programme and contribute to participation of young people in democratic life, intercultural dialogue and social inclusion; thus, '91% project leaders involved in Transnational Cooperation Activities and Mobility of Youth Workers (KA1) report that their participation in the project resulted in an increased appreciation of cultural diversity in their organisation/group, 85% of the project leaders respondents indicate that their participation in the project resulted in an increased participation of young people in their organisation/group, and 84% of the project leaders respondents indicate that their participation in the project resulted in an increased commitment to include young people with fewer opportunities'[42].After the project experience, most youth organisations targeting individuals with fewer opportunities have tried to engage returned participants in local and meaningful activities (information, support) capable of enhancing the experience and encouraging future participation in similar projects. Such engaging activities have been generally organised in response to community needs, perceptions, expectations and aspirations. According to the 2019-2020 RAY MON Report, 90% of responding project participants and project leaders reported that they improved their ability to accomplish something in the community's interest. These abilities were quickly translated into action: 37% of respondents reported becoming more active as citizens as a

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[41] Abbreviations stand for: YE-Youth Exchanges (Key Action 1); EVS-European Voluntary Service (Key Action 1); as of 2018, this format is covered by a new European youth programme, the European Solidarity Corps; SD- Structured Dialogue – meetings between young people and decision-makers in the field of youth (Key Action 3); as of 2019, this format is called Youth Dialogue; YD-Youth Dialogue. Until the end of 2018, this format was called Structured Dialogue.

[42] RAY MON Report, (p.25).

result of their participation in the project, compared to their engagement prior to the project[43]. Furthermore, in what concerns the E+ projects' effects on local communities,

> '72% ('strongly agree' or 'agree') of the responding project leaders stated that the project has created synergies between different stakeholders in the local community and 64% ('strongly agree' or 'agree') that the local community became more committed to the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities.'[44]

Young people, youth organisations and youth workers are assisted with information about EU opportunities and initiatives by the European Youth Portal.

3.4. Actions by various stakeholders[45]

The NAs are very important in ensuring that projects are as inclusive and diverse as possible. They have developed inclusion and diversity plans drawing upon the overarching European principles, values and mechanisms in order to effectively meet the needs of participants with fewer opportunities under the 2014-2020 E+Programme and to assist youth organisations that target these specific groups in their national and international operations. Simultaneously, the SALTO Resource Centres that assist with programme implementation, have played a significant role in promoting and implementing inclusion and diversity actions, particularly in terms of developing and implementing capacity-building events for NAs' staff and other programme beneficiaries. Similarly, the EACEA has remained essential for the centrally managed programme strands. In addition to all these, EU Delegations[46] and NEOs also play an important role in connecting the programme with the target groups addressed by this Strategy in Partner Countries.

3.4.1. Awareness raising and outreach activities

The role of the NAs has been crucial in creating and using information materials, outreach and information platforms, as well as in regularly targeting and contacting youth organisations operating in fields related to inclusion and diversity. By joining efforts with other bodies, such as SALTOs and ESC[47], NAs have concretely responded to Erasmus+ priorities and to the achievement of European objectives. A major responsibility of any NA has been to treat inclusion as a high priority in its national activities and policies and to ensure that the opportunities provided by the E+ Programme are widely known. In a survey conducted from October 2017 to April 2018 by RAY[48] on a number of 5.007 project leaders, 85% of respondents strongly agreed and 43% agreed that the Erasmus+ Programme achieved its extensive range of programme objectives, in particular the objective of supporting the inclusion of young people with special needs and fewer opportunities[49]. Likewise, our recently conducted survey[50] of NAs has shown that, under the 2014-

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[43] The RAY MON Report surveyed between 2019-2020 project participants and project teams involved in the E+ Youth in Action programme from 33 European countries, (p.25).

[44] RAY MON Research Report 2019-2020, (p.27).

[45] The selected stakeholders in this study (NAs, SALTO resource centers, EACEA, NEOs, etc.) represent the stakeholders mentioned in the ID Strategy (p11).

[46] The EU Delegations play a critical role in representing the EU and its citizens in the country where they are based and in promoting the values, programmes (Erasmus+) and interests of the EU.

[47] The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) was officially launched in 2016 as a funding programme (for what?) of the European Union. It is managed by the European Commission and implemented by the EACEA, National Agencies in participating countries, SALTOs and the European Solidarity Corps resource centre.

[48] The RAY Network – an acronym of Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of European Youth Programmes – is a self-governed European research network that currently involves 34 NAs of the Erasmus+ Youth in Action and ESC programmes and their research partners.

[49] Information retrieved from RAY Thematic Factsheets https://www.researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/RAY_Thematic-Factsheets-Print-01_Programme-Objectives_20200304.pdf

2020 E+ Programme, all participating NAs have taken proactive steps to increase their support for groups of young workers and young participants with fewer opportunities. In addition to this, according to the same survey, a number of 7 (seven) NAs (out of 20 respondents) have either developed or updated their own Inclusion Strategies which demonstrates the prioritisation of inclusion in their national policies, actions and strategies. At the same time, relevant information about the educational opportunities available through the E+ Programme has reached disadvantaged people and has encouraged the participation of diverse groups beginning 2014. Under the E+ Programme 2014-2020, a number of 11,045 completed projects were funded (keyword INCLUSION), 4,470 projects (keyword: DISABILITIES), 6,947 projects (keyword: ACCESS FOR DISADVANTAGED) and 4,570 projects (keyword: INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY) with many more having an inclusion component in them[51]. In particular, efforts have been made to enhance the number of inclusive projects funded by Erasmus+, to improve the quality of funded inclusive projects, to widen participation of youth with fewer opportunities in Erasmus+ projects and to develop inclusion-related support instruments for Erasmus+ applicants and beneficiaries.

3.4.2. Inclusion expertise

Inclusion and Diversity Officers

Following the Erasmus+ ID Strategy, beginning 2014, most NAs have appointed an Inclusion and Diversity Officer to oversee the National Agency's inclusion and diversity efforts and to serve as point of contact for the EC, SALTO Resource Centers and other NAs. For example, our survey has indicated that out of the 20 respondent NAs[52], a number of 17 NAs reported appointing an inclusion officer which shows a 85% of NAs working with a dedicated inclusion officer. The role of the Inclusion officers has been to participate in training seminars and to assist their NAs in mainstreaming inclusion and diversity as well as in identifying target groups of disadvantaged, at-risk and vulnerable young participants. As SALTO ID provides practical support to NAs, one of its central tasks has been to effectively support NAs' staff and their inclusion officers through a wide variety of Trainings and relevant Colleague Support Groups.

Trainings for inclusion officers have been provided in the form of workshops, ID-related talks and events, inclusion and diversity forums, cross-sectoral conferences on NEET, seminars, etc. that afforded as many opportunities to exchange practices, celebrate achievements and get updated on ID. Between 2014 and 2020, NAs participated in a variety of training offers provided by SALTO ID (see Table 2). NA participation in such programming afforded the possibility to join a significant diversity of NA staff from other countries engaged in relevant cross-cultural training and learning experiences. Another type of training event for inclusion officers and youth workers was the Quality Charter for SALTO Inclusion training which concerned the more inclusive instruments and quality principles that training organisers could use and develop to make any training course a worthwhile qualitative event.

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[50]   Based on the survey results obtained by the author between June 03 and July 06, 2021. (For more, see Section 3.4 and Annex 1).

[51]   The numbers were obtained on the basis of an advanced search on the EC available database: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects_en

[52]   Information retrieved from the NA survey results conducted by the author between June 03 and July 06, 2021.

Table 2: Type, number of trainings and trained people by SALTO ID with partners[53]

Type of activity/indicator	2014-2020
Number of trainings initiated by SALTO ID per year	4
Number of trained participants (in trainings initiated by SALTO ID)	700
Number of trainings initiated by partners, with SALTO ID contribution per year	3
Number of trained participants (in trainings initiated by partners with SALTO ID contribution)	873
Number of trainings organised by SALTO ID for NA staff per year	2
Number of trained participants (in trainings organised by SALTO ID for NA staff)	140

In addition to trainings, **Colleague Support Groups** were generally organized in the form of 2 intense working days of peer support dedicated to inclusion officers on a particular inclusion issue. During these events, small groups of eight to ten inclusion officers have convened to reflect on and exchange ideas about common challenges, problems, questions, and solutions relating to inclusion issues at the national level. Between 2014 and 2020, the most relevant Colleague Support Group events organised by SALTO for the inclusion officers working in the NAs were:

- **Inclusion Goes Local** (Portugal, online, 2020)
- How to work on inclusion with municipalities
- **Inclusion in European Solidarity Corps** (Latvia, 2019)
  Proposals for a more inclusive European Solidarity Corps
- **Youth work against violent radicalization** (Germany, 2018)
  A basic 'toolkit' including: clarification of the concepts, a list of resources (studies, publications, tools) and projects examples
- **Reaching out to social enterprises** (Czech Republic, 2018)
  Ideas on how to involve social enterprises in E+: Youth in Action programme& European Solidarity Corps
- **How to use E+: YiA for/with/by refugees** (Italy, 2016)
  Ideas on how to develop activities benefiting young refugees/newly arrived migrants
- **Shaping Inclusion & Diversity: Inclusion & Diversity Strategies for NAs** (Portugal, 2016)
  Guidelines on how to shape your own Inclusion & Diversity Strategy
- **Reaching out to youth at risk and NEET**(Estonia, 2015)
  Ideas on how to involve youth at risk and NEET in E+: Youth in Action programme
- **Ideas for the new Inclusion & Diversity Strategy** (Scotland, 2014)
  Suggestions from our colleagues to make inclusion & diversity more effective in Youth in Action (Erasmus+)'.[54]

Proposals evaluators and selection committees

An essential component of inclusion expertise is represented by the work of proposals evaluators and selection committee members who are informed experts about inclusion and diversity in general and who have expertise in inclusion and diversity initiatives and projects. Proposals evaluators under the E+ Programme have assessed proposals for inclusion and diversity projects against a clear set of criteria, among which is the 'Proportionality principle'. On the basis of this principle, a fair assessment takes into consideration the nature and scope of applications as well as the experience and potential of participating organisations. Thus, according to the _ESC-E+ Guide for Experts on Quality Assessment-2018_,

> 'To ensure that the Erasmus+ Programme fully reaches its objectives, experts shall assess the qualitative level of the planned activities, intended goals, expected impact and results

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[53]   Information compiled on the basis of data provided by SALTO ID officers during the interview.

[54]   https://www.saltoyouth.net/rc/inclusion/inclusionfornas/inclusioncolleaguesupportgroups/inclusiongroupreports/

of the project in a proportional way, in relation to the size and profile of the applicant organisations and, if applicable, project partners. Quantity (of activities planned, of priorities met or results produced, etc.) will not be judged in absolute terms but in relation to the capacities and potential of the applicants and partners opportunities.'(p.11)

This has made it possible for beginner applicants and inclusion organisations to be funded alongside other experienced project applications. As well, to raise awareness and guarantee a more thorough evaluation of proposals, efforts have been made by NAs to include evaluators with fewer opportunities in their pool of assessors and evaluation committees so that their expertise can be fully exploited and shared with other evaluators.

The ID Steering Group, which contributes to making the Erasmus+ and ESC programmes for youth as inclusive as possible, consists of inclusion and diversity experts and representatives of the Commission, NAs (Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Ireland, Iceland, Latvia, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Finland, France and Croatia), and youth workers with SALTO ID Resource Centre. Under the 2014-2020 E+ Programme, the ID Steering Group underscored a series of inclusion principles in the *Guide and grids for E+ project assessors*[55], thereby raising awareness about how evaluators can better differentiate added value inclusion projects from projects that only check mark the inclusion box in the hope of getting funded more easily.

3.4.3. Strategic approach

Overall, under the 2014-2020 E+ Programme, the NAs have taken proactive steps to increase their support for groups of young workers and young participants with fewer opportunities. The NA survey results[56] indicate that this strategic approach has been mainly achieved by: mapping new groups/organisations and conducting needs assessments (72%), by developing capacity building partnership (96%), by scoping available resources and tools and developing new ones (62%), by assessing impact and monitoring tested approaches (83%).

Additionally, NAs have developed national Erasmus+ Inclusion and Diversity Strategies action plans that have been tailored to the country's specific circumstances while remaining consistent with the European Erasmus+ ID Strategy. Guides, such as Shaping Inclusion and the Guidelines on 'Shaping Inclusion & Diversity Strategies for NAs', have been provided by SALTO Inclusion to aid NAs to draft and implement their own national inclusion strategies. In addition, the library of national ID strategies has been made available by SALTO ID in order to inspire peers from other NAs to elaborate and perfect their own ID Strategy[57].

3.4.4. Reaching out

NAs collaborate with organisations who work with specific subgroups of young people with fewer opportunities. To maximise this cooperation, under the 2014-2020 E+ Programme, the NAs and SALTO ID have directed their communication efforts towards a broader range of groups by engaging via traditional and social media channels youth organisations capable of positively impacting on the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.[58]

3.4.5. Supportive approach

Under the 2014-2020 E+ Programme, NAs have actively and directly assisted inclusion project organisers at all project stages and special treatment to newcomers and disadvantaged groups

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[55]   Information retrieved from ID Steering Update 2018 (p.1), available at:https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-3729/ID%20Steering%20Group%20update_2018.pdf

[56]   Information retrieved from the NA survey conducted by the author between June 03 and July 06, 2021.

[57]   Library is available at: https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/inclusionfornas/shapinginclusionindetail/

[58]   Information retrieved from SALTO Inclusion 2020 Internal Report, made available by SALTO ID.

has been provided in order to remove participation barriers in the programme and create a level playing field. To his purpose, NAs, often together with SALTOs, have conducted a wide variety of national and international events, workshops, trainings, and supportive activities for both mainstream youth workers as well as for new participating organisations and disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of people wishing to participate in the Programme. As a result, well over 176,000 of people with special needs and/or fewer opportunities participated in the Erasmus +Programme through the agency of surveyed NAs between 2014 and 2020[59].

In addition to their own activities, NAs have benefitted from the support (resources, information, and training) provided by the SALTO-Youth Inclusion (based in Belgium)with the aim of maximising both the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities in the E+ Programme and the support provided for youth workers and their inclusion work. This support came under various forms of collaborations and allowed for the participation of NAs in dedicated participatory and awareness-raising events:

- 'organising inclusion training courses for youth workers and groups at risk of social exclusion (**8** activities per year);
- designing training and youth work tools in support of inclusion projects (**300 Inclusion tools** in the SALTO Toolbox and 2197 **tools** listed);
- providing regular and updated inclusion information and project opportunities (the SALTO-Youth Inclusion website registers over **250.000 visits** per year;**100.000 downloads**/ year and the Inclusion Newsletters reach almost **10.000 subscribers**);
- raising awareness of practical and inspirational publications and research for international inclusion projects;
- presenting trainers and resource persons in the field of inclusion and youth;
- bringing together stakeholders to facilitate a more inclusive inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities.'[60]

Another notable supportive approach provided by NAs and SALTO for youth organisations is the Strategic Partnership on Inclusion (SPI), which has emerged as a collaborative effort between 16 Erasmus+ NAs(Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Finland, Cyprus) and two SALTO-YOUTH resource centers (Inclusion and Diversity and South East Europe).

The main focus of the SPI is on organisations involving youngsters with health problems and disabilities, NEETs, youth from rural areas and diverse cultural backgrounds (including migrants and refugees). Under the 2014-2020 E+ Programme, according to the interim 2019 results[61],the organised 'national and international SPI activities and events significantly contributed to participants' **knowledge** of/ **motivation** to

Figure 3: Strategic Partnership on Inclusion August 2019 results

> The SPI reached out to 2078 NEW inclusion organisations;
> 623 of those responded positively/showed interest
> 810 inclusion workers of those 'interested; organisations' participated in a national SPI activity - *some NAs worked with umbrella organisations that sent more than one inclusion worker;*
> 275 inclusion workers of those 'interested organisations' participated in an international SPI activity;
> By August 2019, these inclusion workers/organisations organised 68 E+ projects as a result of SPI, including approximately 745 young people with fewer opportunities (as compared to 654 in 2018).

Source: https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/inclusionfornas/spinclusion/(accessed 16.05.2021).

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[59] Based on information retrieved from a recent survey of NAs conducted by the author between June 03 and July 06, 2021.

[60] Information available at: https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/aboutinclusion/ (accessed 16.05.2021)

[61] These results emerged from an evaluation based on 17 national and 3 international SPI events and are available here:.https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/inclusionfornas/spinclusion/

further organise international youth projects' (See adjoining Figure). This, in turn, has shown a positive impact in what concerns the needs assessment of target groups, motivation, partnership building, networking and support leading to successful applications.

3.4.6. Good practices and monitoring

One of the significant Erasmus+ indicators is the number of people with special needs and fewer opportunities participating in the Programme. To ensure that inclusion and other indicators have registered consistent progress, a constant monitoring of progress is undertaken. The monitoring also provides the most reliable statistics on inclusion and diversity projects. To this purpose, NAs have developed IT tools for data extraction which track progress of ID projects and assess the impact of these projects on youth with fewer opportunities.

Platforms to present good practices

Under the 2014-2020 E+ Programme, successful inclusion and diversity initiatives have been shared by NAs and included in the SALTO-Inclusion good practice database[62]. By creating meaningful synergies, other online platforms have been also instrumental in both disseminating research and in providing virtual access to materials and best practices on inclusion issues. These include:

- European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy (EKCYP) which provides a library of resources on youth policy and an online data base on youngsters' situations across Europe, including the field of inclusion;
- Erasmus+ Project Results platform which gives access to all funded Erasmus+ projects as well as an inspiration from the pool of good practices of inclusion projects;
- European Solidarity Corps project platform which provides an overview of all funded European Solidarity Corps projects, including inclusion and diversity projects;
- SALTO Inclusion & Diversity which provides resources for international youth organisations involving participants with fewer opportunities. Additionally, through the ID Steering Group, it tracks inclusion effects of Erasmus+ mobility projects and data on young participants with fewer opportunities in Erasmus+ youth projects.
- School education gateway which is a school education platform that provides support for online teaching and professional development. It includes a Toolkit on promoting inclusive education and tackling early school leaving as well as other resources on migrant education and dropout prevention.
- Eurodesk.eu which is an integrated platform that works with over 1600 organisations in 36 countries and provides information on mobilities, learning and internship opportunities, grant providers and participating youth organisations
- European Youth Portal which is an online platform operated by the EC and Eurodesk provides information on opportunities and initiatives relevant to young people and youth stakeholders.
- Youth Wiki which is an online resource that fosters European cooperation in the youth field by contributing information on national policies that benefit the young in an easily accessible and regularly updated format.

3.4.7. Enhancing the inclusion approach; national inclusion and diversity strategies

In order to maximise the implementation of the ID Strategy under the 2014-2020 E+ Programme, NAs have taken a closer look at their national needs and have established working groups to develop national ID strategies. The process was generally based on an assessment of the national

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[62]   https://www.salto-youth.net/rc/inclusion/archive/toolsgoodpractices/goodinclusionpractice/

context and the added value that a strategy would bring to the lives of young people. In addition to all this, prior to elaborating their national strategies, NAs had had to conduct a needs assessment to determine: the beneficiaries of the Erasmus+ program; the priorities and objectives of their NA; their working staff (inclusion officers, manager); available resources (financial, human resources) and stakeholders to support an ID strategy; and to no lesser an extent, the particular necessities of young people with fewer opportunities at country level.

Grounded on their own national needs, in addition to the ID Strategy under the 2014-2020 E+ Programme, a number of NAs[63] have developed their own inclusion strategies to serve as a strategic approach to inclusion that contributes to European objectives, while taking national, regional and local specificities into account.

Such is the Romanian National Agency Inclusion Strategy 2016-2021 that was designed in line with the European and specific European Social Fund inclusiveness priorities in Romania as well as other documents including the National Strategy on Social inclusion and poverty reduction (2014-2020), the Strategy on reducing early school leaving in Romania, the Strategy for the inclusion of Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma minority for the period 2015-2020. This NA ID Strategy focuses its inclusion strategy on youth from disadvantaged/rural areas, persons with special educational needs, and Roma participants and thus harmonizes a series of inclusion initiatives at country level. Such NA inclusion strategies represent a coordinated strategic effort to support Erasmus+ and ESC participants in overcoming obstacles (cultural, social, economic, educational, etc.) and in facilitating their access to learning and mobility opportunities.

3.5. EU trends concerning the most disadvantaged categories

In many countries, social exclusion has emerged as a major concern[64]. While increasing access has been a lasting policy priority in many EU Member States, scrutiny of social inclusion of various disadvantaged and/or underrepresented groups has more recently increased. In tertiary education (learning that is done after graduating from high school or entering the workplace) for example, the social inclusion policy instruments used for students from under-represented groups (low socioeconomic or diverse educational backgrounds, ethnic minorities, migrants, and refugees), as well as the evaluation of the effectiveness of some of these instruments on improving access of disadvantaged students have become essential for many EU governments that explicitly focus on expanding access for underrepresented groups.

According to a study[65] that explores the extent to which social inclusion policies are implemented, monitored, and assessed in HE across the EU Member States, widening participation promoted by Member States, regions, and HEIs may be examined on the basis of several major policy levers such as regulations, funding, organisation, and information. The review of the policy levers used in the EU Member States has revealed a number of sixteen (16) typical policy instruments that are important in promoting social inclusion (Table 3).

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[63] Based on the survey results conducted with the NAs between June 3-July 6, 2021, a number of 7 NAs have either developed or updated their own Inclusion Strategies, which represents a percentage of 35% of total respondent NAs.

[64] European Semester Thematic Factsheet Addressing Inequalities, 2017; Poverty and Inequality in the European Union – submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, 2020; Word Social Report, 2020.

[65] A. Kottmann, J.J. Vossensteyn, R. Kolster, A. Veidemane, Zs. Blasko, F. Biagi, M. Sanchez-Barrioluengo, Social Inclusion Policies in Higher Education: Evidence from the EU. Overview of major widening participation policies applied in the EU 28, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019.

Table 3: Policy levers and social inclusion policies in HEIs of EU Member States

| Type of policy levers	Typical social inclusion policies
Regulations	➢ Including measures to widen participation in accreditation criteria
	➢ Change in admission rules for specific groups of students
	➢ Rules for the recognition of prior learning
Funding	➢ Merit-based grants
	➢ Need-based grants
	➢ Family allowances
	➢ Tax-benefits for parents ➢ Student welfare benefits/support
	➢ Incentives to higher education institutions
Organisation	➢ Organisational services to better prepare students from disadvantaged groups in terms of academic competences
	➢ Differentiation/Introduction of (new/shorter) study programmes
	➢ More flexible provision of education
Information	➢ Special support for specific groups for study choice
	➢ Special regulations and programmes for refugees
	➢ Monitoring of students - access, progress and retention
	➢ Dissemination of knowledge from research on barriers to access HE for disadvantaged students

Source: Kottmann et al., 2019, p.49

The study shows that organisational policies are primarily used to better adapt HE provision to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population and that financial aid to students can make a significant contribution to social inclusion in higher education – both through recruitment of more disadvantaged students and through promotion of their successful graduation. Based on the results obtained from eight case studies (Austria, the Netherlands, Czech Republic, Latvia, Portugal, France, Ireland and Scotland) examined in what concerns both their institutional and national policies for social inclusion, the study concludes that most case study countries conduct monitoring of access and social inclusion. There is, however, a dearth of data on criteria such as students' social and ethnic backgrounds that could shed light on the evolution of equity in access and on which particular student groups widening participation policies should target. This indicates a more acute need for future research investment into roadblocks to and enablers of access for students from vulnerable groups.

On a larger scale, promoting social inclusion by means of reducing poverty[66] has registered good results especially over the last years (Table 4) being one of five core targets of the EU's framework policy Europe 2020. While social exclusion has been primarily defined in terms of poverty risks, the degree to which individuals feel included in society and take an active role in family, neighbourhood, social events and community engagements is also highly relevant.

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[66]   Additional instruments that can support and contribute to promoting social inclusion are: The Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth sets up objectives for eradicating poverty for at least 20 million people and increasing employment among people aged 20 to 64 to 75%. The Europe 2020 strategy's flagship initiatives, such as the Platform Against Poverty and Social Exclusion and the Agenda for New Skills and Jobs, will continue to contribute to efforts to meet these targets. More information about the targets and flagship initiatives to be found here: https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&furtherNews=yes&newsId=10035

Table 4. People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex
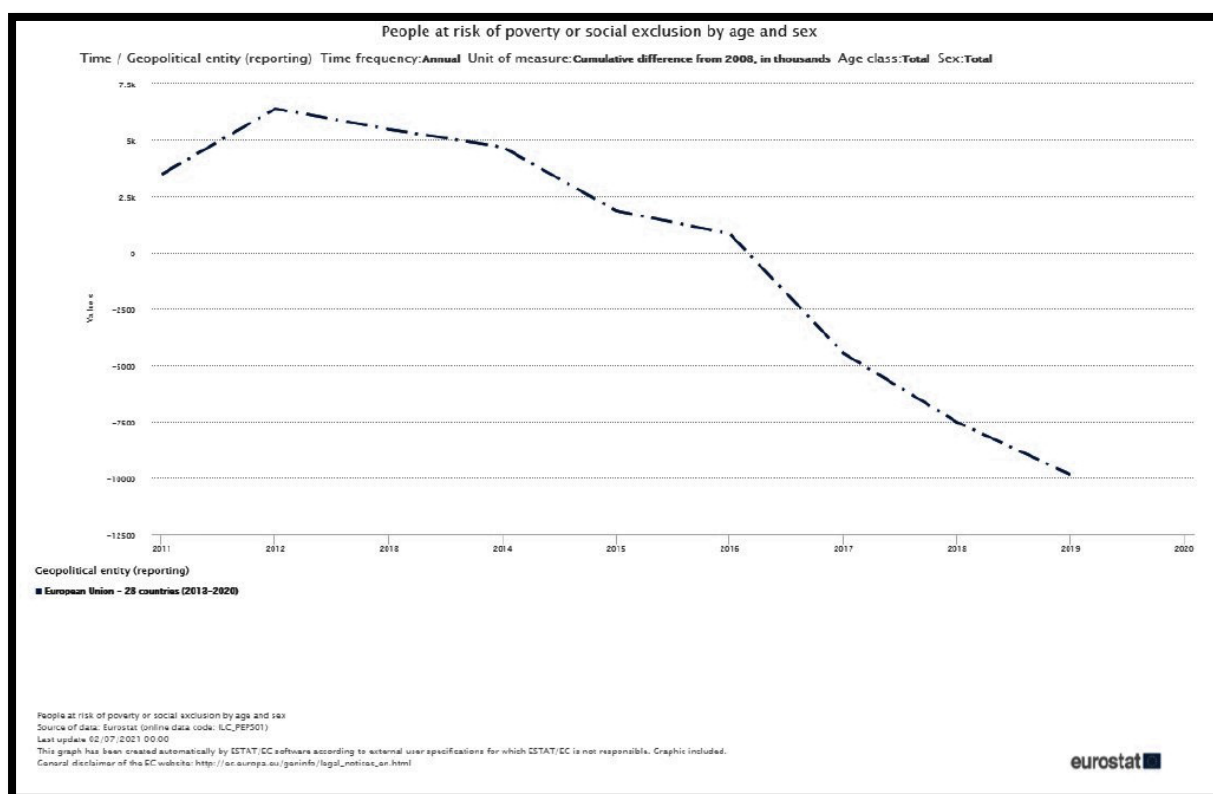
Source: Eurostat, 2021

The EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018 is another initiative that was developed as a framework for cooperation on youth related issues[67]. In May 2018, the European Commission proposed a new EU Youth Strategy for 2019-2027, with the aim of maximising young people's participation in democratic life, fostering their social and political engagement, and ensuring the resources necessary for them to engage in society. Through programmes such as the Youth Guarantee and Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), the policy emphasis in the next years will be on boosting youth employment as an essential path to social inclusion.

The YEI will thus remain a major source of EU funding that will contribute to the implementation of Youth Guarantee schemes until 2023. It will assist NEETs and will aim to ensure that young people in the most challenging regions of Europe receive targeted assistance (for job placements, traineeships, education programs leading to a qualification, etc.) Likewise, under the Youth Guarantee, EU Member States will continue to implement measures to ensure that youth under the age of 25 benefit from a highest employment offer, additional education, or a traineeship within a four-month period of graduating from school or being unemployed.

A stronger focus on the social inclusion policies for disadvantaged groups of young people has become imperative against the backdrop of the recent pandemic context when a large number of workers were laid off as a result of the virus's surge across the EU and the restrictive measures implemented by Member States to contain it. It has thus become evident that young people will be among those hardest hit by the containment measures, such as school, personal life and workplace disruptions or /and restrictions[68]. Through the Youth Employment Support[69] a series of

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[67] The EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018 had two major goals: To provide more and equal opportunities for young people in education and the job market; To encourage young people to actively participate in society.

[68] See ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Fourth edition Updated estimates and analysis, 27 May 2020.

[69] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1594047420340&uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0276

initiatives and activities have already been pursued both at the EU and Member State levels and will be continued to support young people in the long term beyond pandemic crisis support.

In particular, initiatives such as the Bridge to Jobs program will strengthen the Youth Guarantee and will broaden its outreach to at-risk youth throughout the EU, now encompassing those in the 15-29 age group. To avoid discrimination, such programs will be even more inclusive, with a broader reach to more disadvantaged groups and marginalised communities, such as youngsters from ethnic minorities and backgrounds, youth with special needs, and youth residing in countryside, remote, or impoverished urban areas. The Youth Employment Support and other Initiatives are complementary to other national actions supported by the European Social Fund whose aim is to implement Youth Guarantee schemes. For the 2021-2027 period, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) will be integrative of the Youth Employment Initiative thereby preserving its focus on youth employment. Thus, beyond direct assistance to individuals, the ESF+ will continue to advance the reform of youth employment, education, training, and social systems and services. In addition, the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU) will add fresh additional resources to existing cohesion policy programmes in particular in support of job creation and youth employment measures.

4. Looking Ahead: Towards a More Inclusive ERASMUS+ Programme

Although societies are becoming increasingly diverse in a variety of ways, the principles of equality and inclusion are ingrained in the European Union's core values. As a result, there is a greater urgency in Europe to learn how to navigate diversity and build inclusive societies. To this purpose, the Erasmus+ is an essential EU program that can help.

One of the key priorities of the 2021-2027 E+ Programme is to offer a more inclusive and accessible programme. To achieve that, a better understanding of inclusion and diversity in EU youth programs - in particular of the marginalised youth and of what Erasmus+ (and its forerunners) has accomplished in terms of integrating youth with fewer opportunities and strengthening the potential of youth workers to manage diversity - remains critical for the next generation of EU youth programmes.

4.1. Conclusions

The conclusions of the current study are premised on the value of the ID Strategy and takes into consideration the results of the present study combined with those expressed by various E+ Programme evaluations. In this sense, it can be said that, for the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ Programme, the ID Strategy has been instrumental in providing a conceptual understanding of inclusion and diversity having served as a key factor both in improving inclusion in youth work and in developing a common operational framework for initiatives, approaches and activities. Following the ID Strategy, the Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020 'has put in place more actions to strengthen the participation of disadvantaged groups compared to predecessor programmes'[70]. In accordance with the mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ Programme (2014-2020),

> 'The contribution of Erasmus+ to a more cohesive Union is also clearly evidenced. The programme reaches out to disadvantaged people more than previous EU programmes or comparable national schemes, although more still needs to be done to reach out to the more vulnerable in society as outlined above. The geographical balance has also improved with small countries and countries from Central and Eastern Europe being better integrated than in the predecessor programmes.'[71]

The fact that the programme's inclusion approach worked is even further endorsed by project participants and project leaders:

> '[...]the programme's inclusion approach works. 88% of project leaders agree that their project contributed to supporting the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities or special needs in the Erasmus+ Youth in Action Programme (48% strongly agree, 40% agree)'.[72]

Within the context of the E+ Programme 2014-2020, the NAs have played a critical role in developing and implementing information materials, outreach efforts, and information platforms, as well as in regularly identifying and contacting youth organisations working in fields related to inclusion and diversity. NAs have effectively responded to the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ priorities and the achievement of European objectives by collaborating actively with other bodies such as SALTOs and the ESC, by ensuring that the E+ Programme's opportunities are widely known, by developing inclusion and diversity plans and strategies based on the European principles in order to respond to the needs of participants with fewer opportunities, by assisting youth organisations in their national context, and, in no lesser degree, by making sure that projects are as inclusive and diverse as possible.

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[70]   According to Mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020), (p.26).

[71]   https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/DE/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52018SC0040 (p.81).

[72]   Ray REPORT (p. 36)

The Mid-term evaluation of the E+ Programme also underscores the contribution of the programme towards targeting disadvantaged young people by reporting that 11.5% of the total number of Erasmus+ participants were under-represented groups of young participants with disadvantaged backgrounds and fewer opportunities. However, while in general, the Erasmus+ Programme 2014-2020 was found to be 'extremely effective and more coherent, relevant, better aligned with EU policies and more flexible to adapt to EU emerging needs than its predecessor programs', pursuant to the same Mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020) there is a '**need to do more to reach out to the more vulnerable** in society and to facilitate the participation of smaller-size organisations'[73]. This need for intensified efforts to reach out to more disadvantaged and vulnerable people has emerged from the programme's goal to ensure that it reaches out not only **'to those who are easier to reach among the disadvantaged**, [but also] to those who are disengaged or at risk of marginalisation'[74].

Aimed at making the Erasmus+ youth programmes beyond 2020 more inclusive, the following recommendations were advanced by SALTO ID[75] on the basis of collected proposals from a wide range of sources[76].The strengthening of inclusion and diversity in the Erasmus+ programme youth field can be achieved on three levels, as shown also in Table 5 below. The ID Beyond 2020 describes even more specific actions at each level:

1   'By *rethinking the strategic approach* to foster programme inclusion by stakeholders;
2   By *strengthening programme accessibility* by the European Commission in what concerns activity formats, administration, recognition of impact and follow-up; and
3   By *promoting inclusion* via training and capacity building, more flexible and supportive outreach and programme approach by NAs, SALTO and ESC resource centres and programme's beneficiaries'[77]

Table 5: A three level approach towards strengthening inclusion and diversity in the E+ programme youth field

HOW	WHAT	BY WHOM
RETHINK	**Strategic approach**	**Stakeholders**
STRENGTHEN	**Programme accessibility**	**European Commission**
PROMOTE	**Inclusion**	**NAs, SALTO and ESC resource centres and programmes' beneficiaries**

Source: The author, based on proposals advanced in ID Beyond 2020, (p.9).

Following the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ Programme, and taking stock of various proposals, recommendations and experiences across sectors, the Implementation guidelines Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for the new Erasmus+ programme 2021-2027was conceived as a document that is

> '[...]the result of this co-creation process and builds up on the experiences across the different sectors of the Programmes and encourages mutual inspiration and motivation amongst them. It features shared definitions across the different sectors, target groups and specific inclusion-related

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[73]   Mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020), (p.80).

[74]   Mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020), (p.27).

[75]   Proposals were advanced in ID Beyond 2020, (p.9-19).

[76]   The collected proposals were formulated on the basis of a wide range of sources including NAs, SALTO and European Solidarity Corps Resource Centre, Inclusion & Diversity officers, report of the Inclusive Mobility Alliance (2019), inputs from the Steering Group of the Erasmus+ Inclusion & Diversity Strategy (March 2019) in the field of youth and Mainz seminar participants (April 2019), outcomes of Transnational Cooperation Activities (TCA) – focused on inclusion, from feedback coming from the Inclusion and Diversity Colleague Support Group as well as 284 survey responses from a survey conducted by SALTO ID (May 2019).

[77]   ID Beyond 2020, (p.9).

objectives, and has been developed in close cooperation with the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps National Agencies and other external stakeholders, with a view to bringing the Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps also within reach of people with fewer opportunities.'[78]

Aimed at boosting inclusiveness, the new 2021-2027 Erasmus+ Programme has been built on specific inclusion-related objectives apt to bring the E+ Programme, along with the ESC, within closer and better reach of people with fewer opportunities.

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[78]   Implementation guidelines Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, version 1/29/04/2021 (p.6).

5. Annex 1 : Survey questions

1. How is awareness and consolidated knowledge about inclusion raised among potential applicants etc. during workshops and meetings or other promotional activities (in the 2014-2020 ERASMUS+ Programme)?
2. How is awareness and consolidated knowledge about inclusion raised among National Agency staff (in the 2014-2020 ERASMUS+ Programme)?
3. How is awareness and consolidated knowledge about inclusion among ERASMUS + project evaluators and selection committees raised in your National Agency?
4. What number of trainings have inclusion and diversity officers attended in your National Agency institution between 2014 and 2020?
5. What type of trainings have inclusion and diversity officers attended in your National Agency institution between 2014 and 2020?
6. What number of trainings has other staff attended (excluding the inclusion officers) in your National Agency institution between 2014 and 2020?
7. What type of trainings has other staff attended (excluding the inclusion officers) in your National Agency institution between 2014 and 2020?
8. Has your institution developed a national inclusion and diversity strategy? Please provide title, number, link and a short description.
9. How is your National Inclusion Strategy aligned with the Inclusion and Diversity Strategy for Youth within Erasmus+ Programme (2014-2020)?
10. How is your National Inclusion Strategy reflective of the needs of people with fewer opportunities at national and regional levels?

Link to survey: https://nl.surveymonkey.com/r/Evaluation_Erasmus_Plus_Programme_2014-2020

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In December 2020, the European Parliament Conference of Committee Chairs authorised the launch of an implementation report on the Implementation of inclusion measures within Erasmus+ 2014-2020 by the European Parliament Committee of Culture and Education (CULT) (2021/2009(INI)).

The Ex-Post Evaluation Unit (EVAL) of EPRS has been asked to assist in the preparation of the implementation report with a European Implementation Assessment (EIA).

The EIA consists of two parts: an in-house desk-research analysis and two external studies that combine desk research and primary data collection. The focus of the EIA is the learning mobility of individuals and the inclusion of young people with special needs or fewer opportunities.