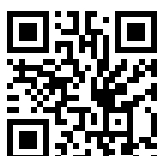
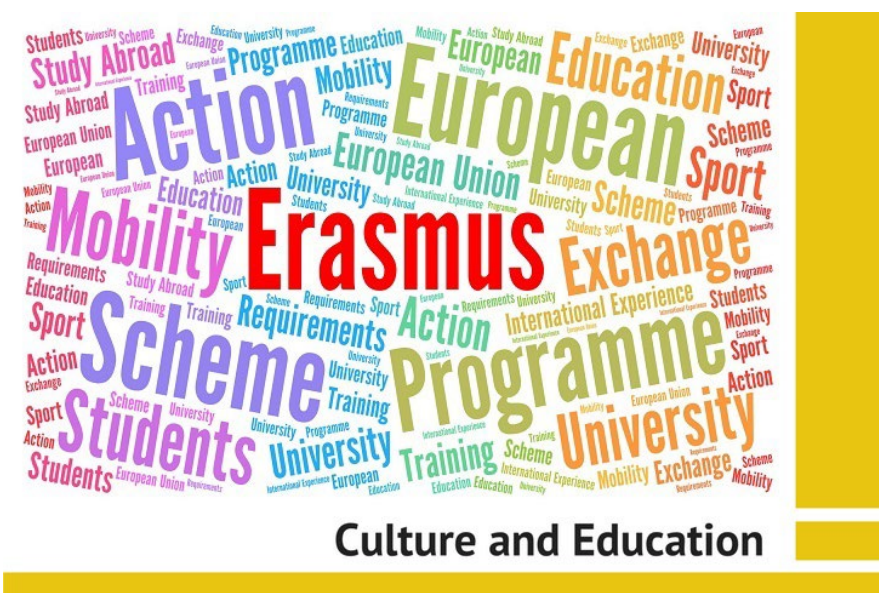


EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in culture, media, education, youth and sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives

Erasmus+



RESEARCH FOR CULT COMMITTEE

EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in culture, media, education, youth and sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives

Erasmus+

Abstract

This study provides an overview of the implementation to date of the 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme. It analyses the early programme implementation and provides a description of barriers identified. The main finding is that the programme implementation is progressing well overall, although improvements can be made to the 'Youth' part of the funding programme. Administrative shortcomings could also be addressed. The study concludes with a set of recommendations.

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education.

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	5
LIST OF BOXES	6
LIST OF FIGURES	6
LIST OF TABLES	6
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	7
1. INTRODUCTION	10
2. BACKGROUND, MAIN FEATURES AND BUDGET	11
2.1. Main features and structure	13
2.1.1. Objectives and activity types	13
2.1.2. Activities by beneficiary type	15
2.1.3. Implementation structures	15
2.2. Budget for 2021-2027	17
2.3. What is new in Erasmus+ 2021-2027?	18
2.3.1. Highlights of early implementation	23
3. IMPLEMENTATION 2021-2022: HIGHLIGHTS AND ISSUES	25
3.1. Budget consumption and resources: implementation highlights and issues	25
3.1.1. Budget consumption	25
3.2. Inclusion measures	27
3.3. Effectiveness & added value	28
3.3.1. The role of national agencies	28
3.3.2. The mechanics of implementation	28
3.3.3. The benefits of Erasmus+	31
3.4. Digitalisation & IT tools	31
4. REPERCUSSIONS OF EXTERNAL FACTORS	34
4.1. The COVID-19 pandemic and recovery	34
4.2. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine	35
4.3. The UK's withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit)	36
4.4. The economic crisis	37
5. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF ERASMUS+	38
6. RECOMMENDATIONS	41
REFERENCES	43
ANNEX 1: ERASMUS+ BUDGET OVERVIEW	46

ANNEX 2: SURVEY BRIEFING	48
ANNEX 3: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES	70

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BM	Beneficiary Module
CULT	Committee on Culture and Education
DG EAC	Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
E+	Erasmus+ programme
EACEA	European Education and Culture Executive Agency
EC	European Commission
EPSR	European Pillar of Social Rights
ESC	European Student Card
ESN	Erasmus Student Network
KA1	Key Action 1: Learning mobility
KA2	Key Action 2: Cooperation among organisations and institutions
KA3	Key Action 3: Support to policy development and cooperation
NA	National Agency
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OG	Operating Grant
OLS	Online Language Support
PMM	Project Management Module
QS	Quality Support
SALTO-YOUTH	Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities for Youth

LIST OF BOXES

Box 1: Opportunities under Erasmus+ in a nutshell	15
Box 2: The 'greening' of Erasmus+: responsiveness to a Parliament Resolution	19
Box 3: Inclusion in the current programme: responsiveness to Parliament resolution	21

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Schematic representation of the structure of Erasmus+	14
Figure 2: Erasmus+ budget allocation 2021-2027 (% of total budget)	17

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Erasmus+ main priorities 2021-2023	12
Table 2: Erasmus+ cumulative implementation rate at the end of 2022 (EUR million)	26
Table 3: Summary of the survey findings	39
Table 4: Breakdown of Erasmus+ budget for 2021-2027 (EUR billion)	46
Table 5: Budget allocation limits for Erasmus+	47
Table 6: Anonymised list of stakeholders interviewed	70

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Erasmus+: the Union programme for education and training, youth and sport 2021-2027 integrates actions on all learning contexts, whether formal, non-formal or informal at all life stages. The current programme is based on the same approach as the previous programme of clustering activities under Key Actions (KA 1 Learning Mobility of Individuals, KA2 - Cooperation among organisations and institutions, KA3 – Support to policy development and cooperation) plus Jean Monnet Actions. The KA approach now applies to sport as well, unlike the previous programme. The priorities for 2021-2023 are Inclusive Erasmus+, Green Erasmus+ and Digital Erasmus+, which are mainstreamed across the programme.

The bulk of the budget (80%) is channelled through the national agencies (NAs) in the participating countries (indirect management) while the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) disburses the rest. Of a total budget of EUR 25.92 billion for 2021-2027, 24.8% was committed and 19.3% was paid in the first two years; these percentages very nearly met budgetary targets.

The budget represents a significant increase over the previous programme period, albeit less than the European Commission and the European Parliament had wanted. Surveys of NAs and a wider group of stakeholders carried out to support this study indicated relatively strong satisfaction with the increased budget from NAs and rather less strong levels of satisfaction among stakeholders. However, other evidence collected through comments on the surveys, interviews and position papers showed that the increase was nevertheless welcome. The areas that stakeholders would like to see better funded are KA1 and KA2.

Diversity and inclusion have always been important to the Erasmus programmes, but the 2021-2027 programme has a new emphasis that is being supported by the adoption of a new framework on the promotion of inclusion and diversity, and guidance on best practice. There is a strong agreement that Erasmus+ is contributing to improving diversity and inclusion. New features of the programme, such as small-scale partnerships, lump sums and two-stage proposal procedures, were welcomed as being likely to attract smaller organisations and newcomers. Stakeholders would nevertheless like to see more done to bridge the gap between the actual cost of individuals studying abroad and the grant they receive despite the introduction of top-up payments for those with fewer opportunities. The time and cost required to put in an application, and the fact that smaller organisations often need external help to make their application, are often deterrents for organisations with few resources. The procedures are complex to understand for small and new entrants to the process, such as young people.

Across a range of possible benefits, increasing non-formal and informal learning mobility, promotion of the participation of young people in democratic processes and civic engagement, promotion of inclusion and diversity, improving the quality of education, training and youth work and learning mobility stood out in the survey, with two-thirds or more of stakeholders seeing these activities, which are core Erasmus+ activities, as beneficial. There is considerable scepticism about the contribution to sport and some doubt about the contribution to the digital transition.

The programme's effectiveness is being undermined, however, by practical issues. Although aspects of applying for Erasmus+ funding have improved or are delivering well (e.g. in terms of clarity of the calls or communication about them), the efficiency of application, evaluation and reporting processes are being hampered by a lack of support and guidance, inconsistency across NAs. Above all, the user-unfriendliness of the proposal form and digital and IT tools is an issue.

Erasmus+ is proving resilient to external factors. It has weathered COVID-19 and adapted its approach to the accelerated adoption of digital environments. It has also absorbed the changes related to the UK's departure from the EU without perceptible problems, and it has facilitated the inclusion of refugees from Ukraine. Rising prices remain a concern to both NAs and stakeholders.

The following recommendations are made:

Recommendation 1: Strengthen coordination to ensure a common understanding of Erasmus+ rules

More coordination across the NAs driven by and monitored by the European Commission would lead to more consistent interpretation of the rules across the NAs and prevent NAs requiring documentation or input difficult for small organisations to obtain, while standardising the quality of evaluations across participating countries. The European Commission should ensure NAs and their evaluators have a clear understanding of the difference between project grants and operating grants, as the capacity-building objective of operating grants that differentiates them from project grants is not well understood.

Recommendation 2: Pursue further simplification

Simplification measures under the current programme have been welcomed, but there is further scope for simplification, including the proposal form, and more straightforward guidance in plain language.

Recommendation 3: Address IT issues

Issues with the new platform should be addressed as a matter of urgency as there is a risk of potential applicants being deterred from applying. Detailed research is needed into the extent of the problem of 'bugs' in the new system and the intrinsic difficulties in using the platform interface. Stakeholders believe that the interface needs simplifying. The Commission should also investigate why NAs have a more negative view of the IT systems than other stakeholders. The Beneficiary Module (BM), Online language support (OLS) and the Project Management Module (PMM) appear to pose particular problems, at least in terms of lack of user-friendliness.

Recommendation 4: Incentive inclusion in Erasmus+

Stakeholders consulted for this study emphasised the importance of fully accomplishing the inclusion ambitions outlined in project proposals and highlighting them in final reports. To this end, the European Commission could consider establishing European targets, accompanied by impact indicators, and a wider incentive system to guide and incentivise countries' contributions towards achieving inclusion within Erasmus+.

Recommendation 5: Address timeliness

More certainty is needed on when decisions are taken and payments are made. Stakeholders not only feel that it takes too long for award decisions to be taken but highlight uncertainties or delays in the timing of contracting and payments to beneficiaries. This adds to their administrative burden and complicates financial planning, which is particularly detrimental to small organisations and newcomers, thus undermining inclusion and diversity ambitions.

Recommendation 6: Improve communication on little known platform features

Stakeholders appear to have a low awareness of the Quality Label and Project Management Modules. This should be addressed at national and EU levels.

Recommendation 7: Improve transparency of the proposal evaluation process

Applicants should be given more detailed feedback on the strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement of their applications. Time devoted to this would bear fruit in the form of better-quality applications in the future. Information sessions on reporting requirements should be scheduled at the beginning of the project rather than waiting some months.

Recommendation 8: Improve transparency of the portfolio of the projects funded

The European Commission could consider increasing the transparency and searchability of the Erasmus+ portal and funding and tender opportunities portal to allow stakeholders and external parties to download and analyse comprehensive project data. Currently, very limited analysis can be carried out at the project and country levels, which limits the transparency of allocated funding.

Recommendation 9: Reduce financial risk

Develop a comprehensive manual or guidance document containing clarification of the requirements and best practices for financial reporting to remove current uncertainty and perceived ambiguity about expectations. This should also cover financial risk management to mitigate the risk of projects failing because of financial problems.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study provides background analysis and recommendations for the research project EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in Culture, Media, Education, Youth and Sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives: Erasmus+.

The study is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a descriptive overview of the programme design and background; Section 3 focuses on early implementation of the Erasmus+ programme; Section 4 discusses the repercussions of external events on implementation, Section 5 analyses some of the strengths and weaknesses of the current programme; and Section 6 presents the recommendations developed based on the findings of the study.

Annex 1 provides an overview of the Erasmus+ budget. Annex 2 contains the survey briefing of the surveys carried out to collect information for the study. Annex 3 presents an anonymised list of stakeholder interviews.

The findings are based on desk research, surveys¹ of national agencies and a wider group of stakeholders (organisations receiving Erasmus+ funding or potential recipients of Erasmus+ funding), and interviews.

¹ A total of 179 survey responses were received and analysed as part of the study.

2. BACKGROUND, MAIN FEATURES AND BUDGET

KEY FINDINGS

- Erasmus+ supports a range of EU policies, including the European Education Area, the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027, the European Skills Agenda, the European Union Youth Strategy, the European Union Work Plan for Sport (2021-24) and the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).
- Erasmus+ 2021-2027 has four priorities: Inclusive Erasmus+, including the integration of refugees; Green Erasmus+ (climate and biodiversity mainstreaming); Digital Erasmus+; and participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement. It is unclear how or whether Parliament's concerns on the greening of Erasmus and inclusion are being taken into account.
- Erasmus+ has a significantly increased budget, with higher education taking the single largest allocation. While the budget is less than the European Commission and the European Parliament had advocated, and stakeholders would be particularly happy to see more funding for learning mobility and partnerships, the increase has been welcomed.
- Innovations include funding for projects under the policies it supports – e.g. European universities and Erasmus+ teacher academies, new forms of partnership to improve diversity and inclusion, and strengthening the youth component, and the extension of the Key Action approach to sport, putting it on a par with education and training, and youth in terms of structure, though the funding level is small by comparison.

Erasmus+: the Union programme for education, training, youth and sport 2021-2027 funds formal, non-formal and informal learning for all ages. However, the main beneficiaries are university students as higher education takes the single largest share of the budget² (see Annex 1.) The emphasis of the programme is on mobility – i.e. supporting learners to spend time in other countries – and cooperation. The programme puts a special emphasis on social inclusion, the green and digital transitions, and on promoting young people's participation in democratic life³. Participation in democratic life takes on particular importance a year before the next elections to the European Parliament. The overarching priorities, which are set each year, are illustrated in Table 1.

² EU, 2021, 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, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0817&qid=1688559352929> (accessed 5 July 2023).

³ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/erasmus-performance_en#budget

Table 1: Erasmus+ main priorities 2021-2023

Year	Priorities			
2021	Inclusive Erasmus+	Green Erasmus+	Digital Erasmus+	
2022	Inclusive Erasmus+	Green Erasmus+	Digital Erasmus+	
2023	Inclusive Erasmus+ including the integration of refugees	Green Erasmus+ (climate and biodiversity mainstreaming)	Digital Erasmus+	Participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement

Source: Erasmus+ work programmes 2021, 2022, 2023

Erasmus+ supports a range of EU policies. The Regulation governing Erasmus+ refers specifically to the role of Erasmus+ in support of the European Education Area⁴, the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027⁵, the European Skills Agenda⁶, the European Union Youth Strategy⁷, the European Union Work Plan for Sport (2021-24)⁸ and the link between the aims of Erasmus+ and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR).⁹ Other relevant initiatives and policies include the Council Resolution on a New European Agenda for Adult Learning 2021-2030 (NEAAL 2030)¹⁰, the Council Resolution on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda¹¹, the European Strategy for Universities¹² and the European Year of Youth (2022).¹³

Initiatives to operationalise these policies which are funded by Erasmus+ 2021-2027 include: European universities (transnational alliances)¹⁴, centres of vocational excellence, teacher academies and the promotion of “language aware schools”.

⁴ EC, 2020, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on achieving the European Education Area by 2025, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625> (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁵ EC, 2020, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 Resetting Education and Training for the Digital Age, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0624> (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁶ EC, 2020, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions; European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0274> (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁷ EU, 2021, Resolution of the Council of the European Union and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on a framework for European cooperation in the youth field: The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027, p. 1–22, available at: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:42018Y1218\(01](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:42018Y1218(01) (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Principle 1 of the EPSR relates to “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” Principle 1 of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#).

¹⁰ EU, 2021, [Council Resolution on a new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030](#).

¹¹ EU, 2020, Resolution of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on the Framework for establishing a European Youth Work Agenda 2020/C 415/01, 1–8, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A42020Y1201%2801%29> (accessed 5 July 2023).

¹² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2022:16:FIN> EC, 2022, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions On a European Strategy for Universities, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2022%3A16%3AFIN> (accessed 5 July 2023).

¹³ https://youth.europa.eu/year-of-youth_en

¹⁴ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>

2.1. Main features and structure

2.1.1. Objectives and activity types

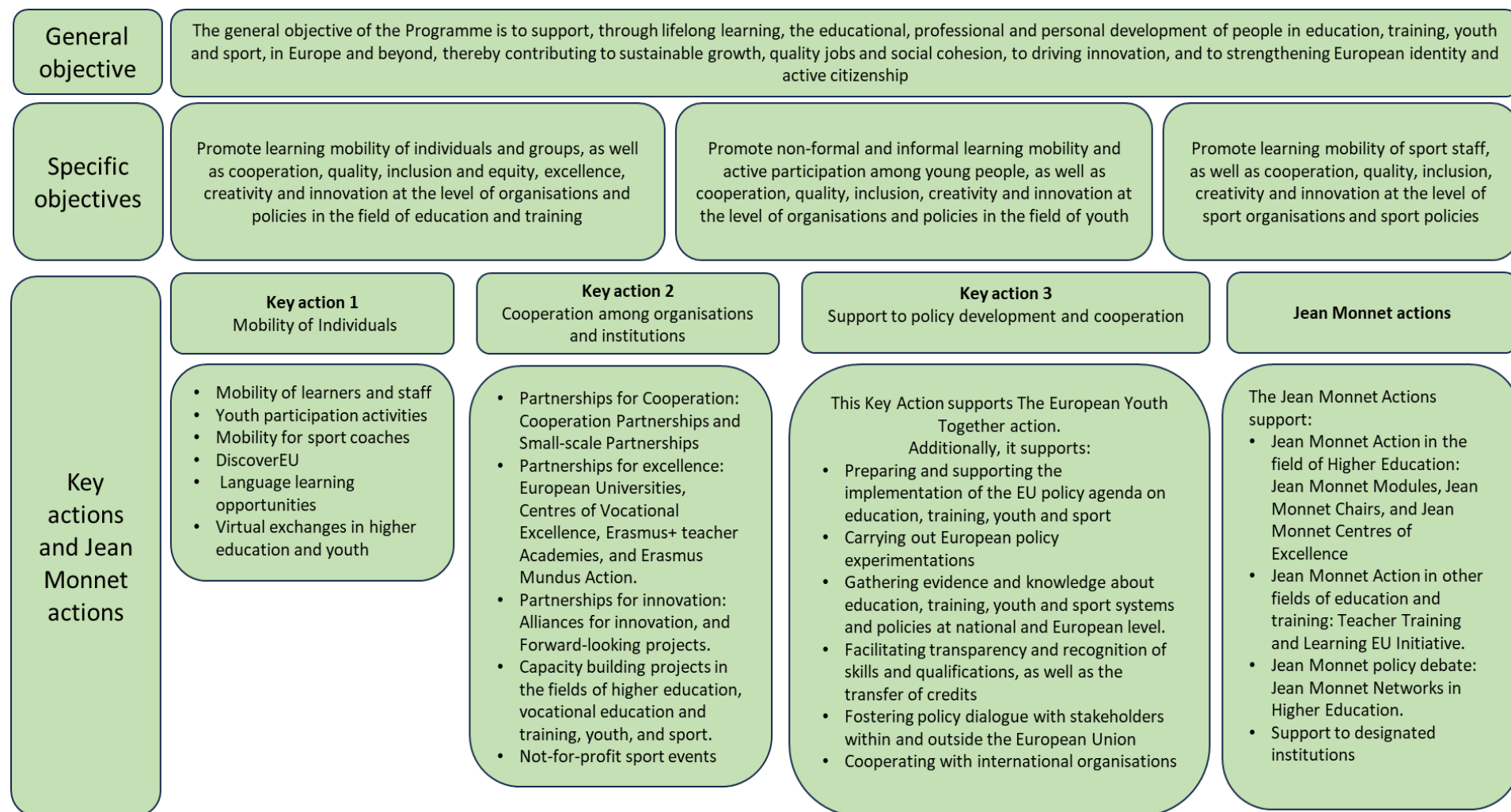
Article 3 of the Erasmus+ Regulation (EU) 2021/817¹⁵ establishes a general objective for Erasmus and specific objectives for education, training, youth and sport, which are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 also illustrates how the funding is channelled through Erasmus Key Actions and Jean Monnet Actions and the types of actions eligible for funding under each:

- Key Action 1: Learning mobility
- Key Action 2: Cooperation among organisations and institutions
- Key Action 3: Support to policy development and cooperation
- Jean Monnet Actions: support to teaching and research¹⁶

¹⁵ EU, 2021, 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, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/817/>

¹⁶ In particular the European University Institute, Florence, including its School of Transnational Governance; the College of Europe (Bruges and Natolin campuses); the European Institute of Public Administration, Maastricht; the Academy of European Law, Trier; the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, Odense; and the International Centre for European Training, Nice.

Figure 1: Schematic representation of the structure of Erasmus+

Source: Own elaboration from Regulation (EU) 2021/817

2.1.2. Activities by beneficiary type

There is funding for education, training, youth and sport under each Key Area, but Jean Monnet actions only fund actions in the area of education and training. Box 1 sums up the opportunities available for individuals and those available to organisations.

Box 1: Opportunities under Erasmus+ in a nutshell¹⁷

Individuals:

Students: study or traineeships abroad, Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters;
Staff: teaching abroad for those working in education with relevant knowledge and experience¹⁸;
Staff: training abroad for those working in the education sector;
Pupils: study period abroad individually or in a group;
Trainees: workplace traineeships;
Adults: individual learning or group-based mobility;
Young people (13-30): youth exchanges, DiscoverEU free travel pass;
Youth workers: training or networking abroad; and
Sport staff: training or job shadowing abroad.

Organisations:

Organising mobility for individuals. Projects to:

- Develop, transfer and/or implement innovative practices at organisational, local, regional, national or European levels;
- Improve the quality of education, training, and youth systems in Europe, and to promote transnational learning and cooperation;
- Support policy reform;
- Teach, research, participate in policy debate; develop and implement joint activities; and
- Promote sport and physical activity, identify and implement innovative activities in the field of sport, and manage not-for-profit events to increase participation in sport.

Source: Own elaboration from Erasmus+ handbooks.

The activities under Erasmus+ programme, in order to be eligible for funding, have to be in line with the programme's objectives and must also offer European added value – i.e. be transnational, offer synergies with other EU programmes and contribute to the effective use of EU transparency and recognition tools. The beneficiaries are mainly young people aged 18 to 30, but schools programmes are available from the age of 13.

2.1.3. Implementation structures

Erasmus+ is primarily implemented by national agencies in the 33 countries participating in the programme.¹⁹ These agencies provide information on Erasmus+, select projects to be funded, monitor and evaluate Erasmus+ projects, support applicants and participants, work with other national

¹⁷ See also: [Opportunities under Erasmus+](#).

¹⁸ The rationale for selecting a staff member to teach abroad needs to be justified and documented in the Erasmus+ application. See <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/opportunities-for-individuals/staff-teaching/school-education-staff-teaching>

¹⁹ EU-27, EFTA countries which are part of the EEA, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey.

agencies and the EU promoting Erasmus+, and share success stories and best practices.²⁰ National Erasmus Offices provide advice and support in countries associated with Erasmus+.²¹ There are 78 National Focal Points in other locations where there are students or organisations that are eligible for certain activities.

Some 80% of the funding flows through the national agencies, with the remainder used by the Commission (DG EAC) for follow-up, coordination and evaluation at programme levels, and to fund centralised actions through the relevant executive agency, the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).²²

The EACEA's role is to fund certain activities within KA2 and KA3, generally those with a pan-European dimension. Within KA2 this means education and training partnerships among European NGOs, cooperation and small-scale partnerships in the field of sport, centres of vocational excellence, Erasmus Mundus scholarships, innovation alliances, capacity-building in youth and sport, and non-profit European sports events. Within KA3, EACEA is responsible for European Youth Together (projects aiming to create regional networks); Jean Monnet actions in the field of higher education – modules, chairs and centres of excellence; Jean Monnet in other fields of education and training – teacher training and networks; learning EU initiatives in other fields of education and training; and Jean Monnet policy debates.²³

²⁰ EC, n.d., *National Agencies*, available at: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/contacts/national-agencies> (accessed 5 July 2023)

²¹ EC, n.d., *National Erasmus Offices*, available at: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/contacts/national-erasmus-offices> (accessed 26 July 2023)

²² EC, 2022, *Erasmus+ annual report 2021*, Publications Office of the European Union, available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/635340> (accessed 5 July 2023).

²³ [EACEA](#)

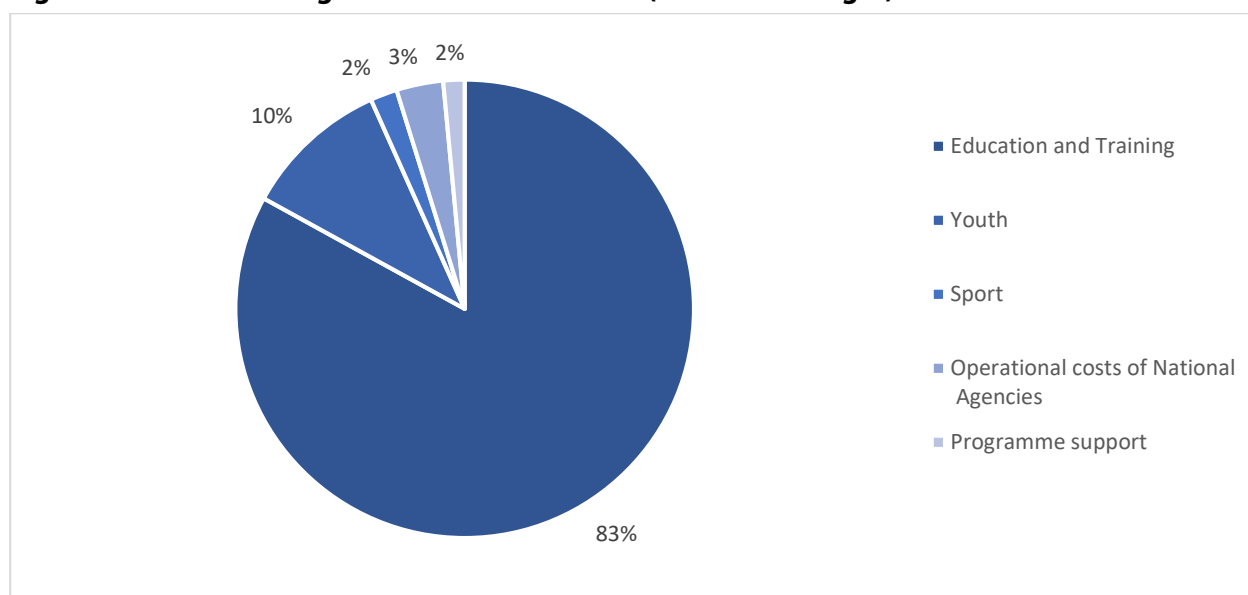
2.2. Budget for 2021-2027

The budget available for 2021-2027 is EUR 26.51 billion, made up of EUR 24.57 billion at current prices and a 'top-up' of EUR 1.938 billion in current prices from the Commission's revenue from fines.²⁴ Most of the budget (up to 83%) is earmarked for education and training. The total budget is a very significant increase on the EUR 14.77 billion allocated in 2014-2020²⁵, but the figures are not strictly comparable as the UK is no longer contributing nor participating in the programme.

Moreover, it is also significantly less than what the European Commission had proposed (EUR 30 billion)²⁶ and the European Parliament had argued for (EUR 41 billion).²⁷ The rationale behind the Parliament's argument was that the aim of the Commission's 2021-2027 programme to increase participation among people with fewer opportunities²⁸ required matching resources²⁹ also to ensure that beneficiaries from disadvantaged backgrounds receive sufficient financial support by the programme through higher grants.

Annex 1 includes an overview of the budget 2021-2027.

Figure 2: Erasmus+ budget allocation 2021-2027 (% of total budget)



Source: Regulation 2021/817. The breakdown is exclusive of the top-up.

²⁴ EC, 2021, *Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 (in commitments)- Current prices*, available at:

https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/mff_2021-2027_breakdown_current_prices.pdf (accessed 5 July 2023).

²⁵ EU, 2013, 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, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32013R1288>

²⁶ https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-3948_en.htm

²⁷ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-promoting-our-european-way-of-life/file-mff-erasmus>

²⁸ EU, 2021, 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, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/817/ Recital 18>

²⁹ See for example: European Parliament, 2018, *INTERIM REPORT on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 – Parliament's position with a view to an agreement*, Opinion of the Committee on Culture and Education, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0358_EN.html#_section11

Candidate countries and countries covered by EU Eastern Neighbourhood policy taking part in aspects of Erasmus+ are covered by a separate budget of around EUR 2.2 billion from External Cooperation Instruments.³⁰

Based on input from stakeholders for this analysis, the budget increase was welcomed, although further increases would also be appreciated, low success rates due to insufficient budget can deter applicants. In the surveys carried out to support this analysis, most national agencies (60%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the budget. Some stakeholders, however, argued that KA1 and KA2 are underfunded.

Overall, the general stakeholder perspective on the individual funding schemes was also positive. The majority found the schemes to be clear and coherent, and considered them adequate for the needs of their projects. They also believed that the funding received and the project duration were sufficient to achieve the expected results.

2.3. What is new in Erasmus+ 2021-2027?

This section addresses new features in the current programme compared to the previous one and additional changes that have been made in the early stages of implementation. It addresses the extent to which Green Erasmus+ and inclusion measures address the concerns of the Parliament.

The digital and green transitions: A new Recital (15) in the Regulation emphasises the importance of innovation and fostering the knowledge, skills, competences and positive attitudes needed in forward-looking study fields or disciplines, such as science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM), climate change, environmental protection, sustainable development, clean energy, artificial intelligence, robotics, data analysis, design and architecture, and digital and media literacy. Alliances for Innovation under Erasmus+³¹ and partnerships for innovation³² are supporting the digital and green transitions. For individuals, the green transition has been supported through a EUR 50 top-up to Erasmus+ grants for green travel to the host country. The success of the programme is also being judged on climate performance. The indicators in the Erasmus+ regulation include the share of activities (KA1) and projects (KA2) addressing climate objectives.³³

³⁰ Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance; Global Europe: Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI).

³¹ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/alliances-innovation>

³² <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/partnerships-innovation>

³³ EU, 2021, Annex II, 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, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/817/>

Box 2: The 'greening' of Erasmus+: responsiveness to a Parliament Resolution

The 'greening' of Erasmus is a particular concern for the European Parliament, which is reflected in a resolution of September 2020³⁴. Parliament also urged the Commission to take environmental principles and practices into account across the whole programme. The resolution also identified a number of specific areas with particular potential. Among these were the Erasmus+ Higher Education Charter, the European Universities Initiative, the Vocational Education and Training Centres of Excellence, the European Week of Sport, eTwinning of teacher networks and Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities (SALTO) platforms and the European Parliament Ambassador School programmes. It stressed the importance of rolling out the European Student Card (ESC) and using it as a tool to promote environmentally friendly life choices. It also called – among others – for measures to promote, monitor and reduce the carbon footprint of participants, participant organisations, national agencies and Erasmus alumni in areas ranging from travel to 'green offices'. This included offsetting the higher cost and time of travel by sustainable means. It also suggested developing green criteria for local and national education authorities.

The top-up for green travel mentioned in this section clearly echo the Parliament's concerns. It is not otherwise possible to establish a direct cause and effect between the Parliament's concrete proposals and Green Erasmus+, which is discussed in a separate section in Erasmus+ work programmes. According to the 2023 work programme³⁵ (which has wording very similar to that of previous years³⁶, and is similar in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide³⁷), Erasmus+ is being used to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes on climate change and sustainable development and to support whole-institution approaches to education for environmental sustainability; the environment and the fight against global warming is a horizontal priority for the selection of projects. Thus, the Commission appears aligned with the European Parliament, but it is not recording holistically how its specific proposals have been taken into account.

The indicator on the number of projects addressing the climate included in the regulation is clearly much less detailed than the suggestions made by the Parliament. Moreover, in listing the players in the work programme, the national agencies (and the desks in associated countries) appear to be notably missing.

Inclusion: The new Articles 15³⁸ and 16³⁹ of the Erasmus+ Regulation required the Commission to develop by 29 November 2021 **a framework of inclusion measures to increase participation rates**

³⁴ EP, 2020, *Effective measures to 'green' Erasmus+, Creative Europe and the European Solidarity Corps* European Parliament resolution of 15 September 2020 on effective measures to 'green' Erasmus+, Creative Europe and the European Solidarity Corps (2019/2195(INI)), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0211_EN.html

³⁵ EC, 2022, *Erasmus+ Annual Work Programme*, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2022-08/2023-erasmus-annual-work-programme-c2022-6002_en.pdf

³⁶ EC, 2022, *Erasmus Programme Guide 2023* (Version 2), available at: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/erasmus-programme-guide-2023-version-2-211222>

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ "The Commission shall, by 29 November 2021, develop a framework of inclusion measures to increase participation rates among people with fewer opportunities, as well as guidance for the implementation of such measures. That guidance shall be updated as necessary over the duration of the programme. Based on the framework of inclusion measures, and with particular attention to the specific programme access challenges within the national contexts, inclusion action plans shall be developed and shall form an integral part of the national agencies' work programmes. The Commission shall monitor the implementation of those inclusion action plans on a regular basis."

³⁹ "The Commission shall, where relevant, ensure that financial support measures, including pre-financing, are put in place to facilitate the participation of people with fewer opportunities, in particular of those whose participation is impeded for financial reasons. The level of support shall be based on objective criteria. 2. In order to improve access for people with fewer opportunities and ensure the smooth

among people with fewer opportunities. This framework, which was adopted on 22 October 2021,⁴⁰ is designed to address two concerns in particular: the cost of learning in another country, which is a deterrent for low-income families or learners with disabilities as the Erasmus+ grant does not always fully cover the cost; and low level of awareness of the opportunities that Erasmus+ provides in some groups of society.

The framework, which is discussed in more detail in Section 3.2, is designed to improve both inclusion and diversity in the design of projects and in the selection of applicants, including finding ways to involve grassroots organisations. Small-scale partnerships (which are described in more detail later in this section) are one measure to achieve this. For individuals, inclusion has been operationalised in Erasmus+ 2021-2027 with an inclusion top-up for individuals of EUR 250 per month. In addition, project grants may be increased to take the physical, mental or health-related conditions of students and staff into account⁴¹. The success of the programme is also being judged partly on the success of inclusion measures – i.e., the number of people with fewer opportunities taking part in activities (KA1), the number of newcomer organisations and institutions funded (KA1 and 2), and the number of small-scale partnerships supported (KA2)⁴².

implementation of the Programme, the Commission shall, where necessary, adjust or authorise the national agencies to adjust the grants to support learning mobility under the Programme. 3. The costs of measures to facilitate or support inclusion shall not justify the rejection of an application under the programme.”

⁴⁰ EC, 2021, Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/1877 of 22 October 2021 on the framework of inclusion measures of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes 2021-2027, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32021D1877> (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁴¹ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/opportunities-for-individuals/students/students-and-staff-with-physical-mental-or-health-related-conditions>

⁴² EU, 2021, Annex II, 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, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/817/>

Box 3: Inclusion in the current programme: responsiveness to Parliament Resolution

Assessing the success of inclusion measures in the previous programme in a resolution adopted in June 2022⁴³, Parliament addressed further measures that should be taken under the current programme. Of these, the top-up grants mentioned above reflect a need to remove a constraint to inclusion identified by the European Parliament. However, evidence on payment timing discussed in section 3.2 suggests that the Parliament's call for upfront payments as an inclusion measure has not yet been acted upon.

While new IT tools have been introduced with the intention of removing administrative barriers that can challenge smaller organisations and newcomers in particular, evidence presented in section 3.4 suggests that the new system is experiencing major teething problems that pose a disincentive to applying for Erasmus+ funding. In addition, the application process continues to be burdensome due to its complexity, length and the opaque language used, which is detrimental to effectiveness (see Section 3.3). Parliament identified these as barriers that continue to be significant, in particular for small organisations and those with fewer opportunities and the situation is seemingly not changing swiftly.

While racism is listed in the 2021, 2022 and 2023 Work Programmes⁴⁴ as one of many issues that Erasmus+ addresses, there is no evidence that Parliament's call for synergies with the EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025⁴⁵ has been specifically heeded.

Sport: Erasmus+ 2014-2020 funded only a limited range of specified sport-related activities, but the scope has been expanded. The Key Action approach, which already applied to education, training and youth, has been extended to sport, with actions for learning mobility, cooperation among organisations and institutions, and support for policy reform.

DiscoverEU: Previously a stand-alone pilot action launched in 2018, this one-month free travel pass for 18-year-olds enables them to discover Erasmus+ countries by rail (with some exceptions if rail is not feasible). DiscoverEU Learning Cycle activities have since 2022 provided a learning component to strengthen the educational aspect, although some stakeholders have questioned whether these plans to provide advance information on countries visited, including their counterparts, are sufficiently educational⁴⁶.

European Student Card: This is scaling up from a pilot phase, although it is still some way from being fully deployed. A new phase is being entered in 2023 with the deployment of a new Router⁴⁷.

New forms of partnership: (i) European Youth Together, national regional partnerships driven by young people themselves and which combine physical cross-border exchanges and non-formal or informal training opportunities that are supported by online activities;⁴⁸ (ii) small-scale partnerships that receive less money for a shorter duration than other cooperation partnerships, and the

⁴³ EP, 2022, European Parliament resolution of 23 June 2022 on the implementation of inclusion measures within Erasmus+ 2014-2020, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0265_EN.html

⁴⁴ EC, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2021 Annual Work Programme Erasmus+, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/2021-erasmus-annual-work-programme-c2021-1939_1.pdf, 2022 Annual Work Programme Erasmus+, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-11/erasmus-annual-work-programme-c2021-7862_en.pdf Amendment of the 2023 Annual Work Programme Erasmus+, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-03/erasmusplus-awp-review-mar23_en.pdf

⁴⁵ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions; A Union of equality: EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2020%3A0565%3AFIN>

⁴⁶ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/opportunities-for-individuals/discovereu>

⁴⁷ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/news/scaling-up-the-european-student-card-whats-next>

⁴⁸ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-3/youth-together>

administrative formalities are simpler. A European dimension is required, but cooperation does not necessarily have to be cross border. These small-scale partnerships are intended to make Erasmus+ funding more accessible for grassroots organisations and to boost participation by those with fewer opportunities⁴⁹.

Youth participation activities: These are non-formal learning activities designed to promote young people's civic and democratic engagement – e.g., through civic action, youth activism, debate and dialogue activities. These activities can be local, regional, national or transnational, but must have a European dimension⁵⁰.

Virtual learning and tools: Erasmus+ remains a programme fundamentally based on mobility, Recital 17 of the Erasmus+ Regulation recognises that physical mobility may not always be possible and 'virtual mobility' can be a reliable alternative⁵¹. The higher education mobility action recognises blended mobility and the development of blended mobility curricula⁵². Virtual exchanges in higher education and for youth are a new feature in Erasmus+ building on a pilot run from 2018-2020⁵³. Virtual learning is now one of the indicators to measure the programme's performance – i.e., the number of participants in virtual learning activities (KA1) and the number of users of virtual cooperation platforms supported (KA2).⁵⁴

Simplification: Simplification measures include extended use of basic grant procedures, two-stage application for certain calls with a simplified first stage, and lump sums⁵⁵ and the reinforced use of **accreditation** by national agencies⁵⁶, which provides simplified access to KA1 funding to organisations adhering to Erasmus+ quality standards.⁵⁷

Revision of the indicators: Compared to its predecessor, the number of indicators under the current programme has been reduced (from 23 to 15) and the presentation has been streamlined and broken down by Key Action, Inclusion, Simplification and Climate contribution.⁵⁸

Discontinuation of the Student Loan Guarantee Facility: This facility was intended to provide a partial loan guarantee to students on a second-cycle degree course, such as a Master's degree in another programme country via the European Investment Fund (EIF).⁵⁹ The staff working document

⁴⁹ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-2/small-scale-partnerships>

⁵⁰ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-1/youth-participation>

⁵¹ EU, 2021, 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, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/817/>

⁵² <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/key-action-1/mobility-projects-for-higher-education-students-and-staff>

⁵³ EC, 2023, *Erasmus+ Annual Work Programme 2023*, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-03/erasmusplus-awp-review-mar23_en.pdf

⁵⁴ EU, 2021, Annex II, 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, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/817/>

⁵⁵ Most recently in October 2022. See: EC, 2022, *Decision authorising the use of lump sums and unit costs under the Erasmus+ Programme 2021 – 2027*, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/erasmus/guidance/lis-and-unit-cost-decision_erasmus_en.pdf (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁵⁶ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/opportunities/organisations/learning-mobility-of-individuals/erasmus-accreditation>

⁵⁷ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/erasmus-quality-standards-mobility-projects-vet-adults-schools?>

⁵⁸ EC, 2021, Annex II, 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, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/817/>

⁵⁹ European Investment Fund, 2022, *Erasmus+ Master Student Loan Guarantee Facility*, available at:

accompanying the 2018 proposal for the new programme⁶⁰ stated that the action's efficiency had proven to be limited and confirmed the recommendation of stakeholders that it be phased-out. It was not included in Erasmus+ 2021-2027.

2.3.1. Highlights of early implementation

As of late July 2023, the EACEA had issued 117 calls for proposals for grants.⁶¹ In 2021, EACEA issued 66 Erasmus+ calls for proposals⁶²; in 2022, the EACEA issued 36 calls for proposals. No aggregate data on the number of proposals received and selected was published.⁶³

According to the EACEA Annual Report for 2021⁶⁴, the highlights of 2021 included:

- Supporting European teachers and digital skills-focused developments via the first call supporting the creation of partnerships for teacher-education and training providers.
- Selection of 11 Erasmus+ Teacher Academies.
- Exploitation of support to the digital transitions in teaching through projects targeting schools, the potential of the eTwinning and the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE), which went live in April 2021.
- eTwinning celebrating its millionth registered user. At the end of 2021 there were 228,000 schools present in eTwinning, an increase of 25% over 2020.

The EACEA Annual Report for 2022 highlighted the following:⁶⁵

- New calls for European universities which led to an increase in the number of university alliances participating in the programme, meeting the target set by the agency's corresponding key performance indicator.
- The European Platform for Urban Greening (ePlug) project, which created a skills ecosystem for urban green landscaping consisting of six centres of vocational excellence in six different European countries.
- Two selection rounds for DiscoverEU travel passes, with 231,980 applications of which 82,716 were successful.

https://www.eif.org/what_we_do/guarantees/erasmus+master-loan-guarantee-facility/erasmus+_implementation_update.pdf (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁶⁰ EC, 2018, *Report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Mid-term evaluation of the Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020)*, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0050&rid=2> (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁶¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-search;callCode=null;freeTextSearchKeyword=;matchWholeText=true;typeCodes=1,2,8;statusCodes=31094501,31094502,31094503;programmePeriod=null;programCcm2Id=43353764;programDivisionCode=null;focusAreaCode=null;destinationGroup=null;missionGroup=null;geographicalZonesCode=null;programmeDivisionProspect=null;startDateLte=null;startDateGte=null;crossCuttingPriorityCode=null;cpvCode=null;performanceOfDelivery=null;sortQuery=deadlineDate;orderBy=desc;onlyTenders=false;topicListKey=topicSearchTablePageState> (accessed 27 July 2023)

⁶² EC, 2022, EACEA Annual Activity Report 2021, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/annual-activity-report-2021-eacea_en.pdf

⁶³ EC, 2022, EACEA Annual Activity Report 2021, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/EAC_AAR_2022_en.pdf

⁶⁴ EC, 2022, EACEA Annual Activity Report 2021, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/annual-activity-report-2021-eacea_en.pdf

⁶⁵ EC, 2022, EACEA Annual Activity Report 2021, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2023-06/EAC_AAR_2022_en.pdf

- Publication of the thematic policy report, 'Teachers in Europe: Careers, Development and Well-being'.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/teachers-europe-careers-development-and-well-being>

3. IMPLEMENTATION 2021-2022: HIGHLIGHTS AND ISSUES

KEY FINDINGS

- Budget consumption was almost 100% for 2021-2022 despite a delayed start and the need to adapt to the post-COVID-19 environment and the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine.
- 70% of projects are on track to achieve their objectives, suggesting that a significant catch-up effort is needed by some to complete their projects.
- The processes for applying for grants have improved compared to the previous programme, but a high number of national agencies (NAs) and wider stakeholders nevertheless feel that it takes too long to award grants.
- Progress has been made on inclusion and diversity, but according to stakeholders there are still a number of financial and administrative barriers for individuals and organisations, ranging from delays in payments to over-complex language in documentation.
- Positives contributing to the effectiveness of Erasmus+ are the clarity of the calls and their aims, and communication by the Commission and the NAs. The biggest negatives are the user-unfriendliness of the proposal forms and of the IT systems.
- The main benefits of taking part in Erasmus+ are increasing non-formal and informal learning mobility, promotion of the participation of young people in democratic processes and civic engagement and promotion of inclusion and diversity.
- Both stakeholders and NAs unhappy about a range of IT issues relating to applying for grants, reporting and implementation tools. NAs report more discontent than stakeholders.

This section discusses budget consumption in the first two years of the programmes, and issues in implementation, notably in relation to the award of funding and inclusion, effectiveness and added value, IT and digitalisation (including simplification).

3.1. Budget consumption and resources: implementation highlights and issues

3.1.1. Budget consumption

By the end of 2022, EUR 6.4 billion had been committed and EUR 5.0 billion had been paid out during the first two years of the programmes. This was 24.8% and 19.3% respectively of a total budget of EUR 25.92 billion⁶⁷. This total differs from the figure agreed in Regulation 2021/817 as adjustments are made

⁶⁷ EC, n.d. Budget performance – implementation, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/erasmus-performance_en (accessed 27 July 2023)

during the life of the Multiannual Financial Framework. Erasmus+ received a budget boost in 2022 and 2023 to help meet rising costs. This was EUR 35 million in 2022 and EUR 24 million in 2023⁶⁸.

Table 2: Erasmus+ cumulative implementation rate at the end of 2022 (EUR million)

	Implementation	2021-2027 Budget	Implementation rate
Commitments	EUR 6 415.9	EUR 25 924.2	24.8%
Payments	EUR 4 999.4	-	19.3%

Source: Budget performance – implementation, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/erasmus-performance_en

The budget consumption can be considered a significant achievement as Erasmus+, like many programmes, was affected by the late adoption of the Multiannual Financial Framework (in December 2021)⁶⁹ and delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This in turn led to late adoption (in May 2021) of the programme Regulation and the annual work programme⁷⁰. Then, just as it appeared that the programme could begin to operate normally in 2022 – though taking account of the long-term effects of the COVID-19 on learners, staff and teaching methods – plans were hit by Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and the price rises affecting all the players. Individual support amounts had to be adjusted upwards and special measures were taken to help Ukrainian refugees. Nevertheless, **budget consumption rates were close to 100% for both commitments and payments.**⁷¹

It is anticipated that in 2023 the cruising speed status with the acceleration of implementation as observed in 2022 will be confirmed⁷². However, one of the findings of the surveys carried out for this study was that 70% of the NAs believed that their country’s projects were on track to deliver their objectives, along with 76% of the funded stakeholders. This suggests that around one-third of the projects need to catch up on delays if they are to achieve their objectives on time.

A significant drawback with regards to the transparency of the programme implementation is the limited usability of the European Commission portal for funding and tender opportunities. For example, the data cannot be downloaded or manipulated for stakeholders to analyse the characteristics of successful projects. The Erasmus+ portal⁷³ provides only limited descriptive information in a downloadable format. The lack of a transparent database constitutes a challenge to analyse the implementation of Erasmus+ in terms of budget and per participating country, beneficiary type, type of project, etc.

⁶⁸ EC, n.d. Budget performance – implementation, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/erasmus-performance_en (accessed 27 July 2023)

⁶⁹ Council Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2093 of 17 December 2020 laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2021 to 2027, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32020R2093>

⁷⁰ EC, n.d. Budget performance – implementation, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/erasmus-performance_en (accessed 27 July 2023)

⁷¹ EC, n.d. Budget performance – implementation, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/erasmus-performance_en (accessed 27 July 2023)

⁷² EC, n.d. Budget performance – implementation, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/programme-performance-statements/erasmus-performance_en (accessed 27 July 2023)

⁷³ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/>

3.2. Inclusion measures

The framework for inclusion measures adopted by the Commission in October 2021⁷⁴, which fulfils a requirement in the Erasmus+ Regulation to adopt such a framework to open the programme up to more people with fewer opportunities and ensure that no one is left behind, has four objectives:

- Mainstreaming inclusion and diversity;
- Offering inclusive features and mechanisms;
- Establishing a common understanding of those considered to have fewer opportunities;
- Supporting beneficiaries to put forward and run more high-quality projects for those with fewer opportunities.

To help beneficiaries, implementation guidelines had already been drawn up.⁷⁵ These explained the policy and the relevant measures, and provided some definitions and guidelines for the national agencies and EACEA on applying the strategy and provided examples of good practice. All mobility projects are expected to include an inclusion dimension and they are scored *inter alia* on support for participants with fewer opportunities and/or organisations that are newcomers or are less experienced.⁷⁶

The survey of stakeholders carried out as part of this analysis suggests that the programme is successfully supporting inclusion and diversity: **73% of the wider stakeholder group felt the programme is contributing to diversity and inclusion to a very large or to a large extent**, while 19% said it contributes to a moderate or small extent. The remainder did not know, although no one considered that it was not contributing at all. In other input to this study, stakeholders welcomed the introduction of lump sums and small-scale partnerships as measures that will promote inclusion.

However, **preliminary results from an Erasmus Student Network (ESN) survey** on experience with the first two years of Erasmus+ 2021-2027 made available for this study **suggest some problems**. Some 73% of those who responded see financial costs (tuition fees, travel costs, living expenses) as a barrier to taking part in an Erasmus. The affordability of the host city is considered more important, though only marginally, than attending courses which will be recognised.

In their response to the ESN survey, stakeholders also emphasised the importance of maintaining efforts of the inclusion ambitions in project proposals and highlighting them in final reports. **Awareness campaigns, dissemination of good practices and sharing of knowledge** at both the European Commission and national levels were seen as crucial in advancing inclusion efforts. Respondents also suggested the establishment of European targets accompanied by impact indicators, as well as the creation of stronger incentive systems to guide and incentivise countries' contributions towards achieving inclusion within the Erasmus programme. There should be targets and impact indicators for inclusion.

The availability and timeliness of interim payments to projects were also raised as important for smaller organisations, and therefore for diversity, during the research for this study. An uncertain cash flow can

⁷⁴ EC, 2021, Commission Implementing Decision (EU) 2021/1877 of 22 October 2021 on the framework of inclusion measures of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Programmes 2021-2027, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32021D1877>

⁷⁵ EC, 2021, *Implementation guidelines Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy*, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/implementation-inclusion-diversity_apr21_en.pdf

⁷⁶ EC, 2023, *inter alia: Erasmus+ Programme Guide (Version 3)*, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-04/ErasmusplusProgramme-Guide2023-v3_en.pdf

also be a barrier to inclusion for students who cannot afford to wait until after their course has started to receive their Erasmus grant. In the ESN survey only 39% received their funding before they left, 39% within 30 days of arrival and 35% later than that.

Other evidence from stakeholders from interviews and position papers emphasised that administrative and IT barriers are linked to inclusion, as discussed in the next sections. They also noted the need to shorten documentation and use simpler language, including language specifically adapted to the needs of those with intellectual challenges, and to make all language versions available along with English.

The ESN also sees inclusion as a wider issue than just including students from a wider range of backgrounds and is calling for inclusive governance models at the European and national levels that involve students in decision-making.

3.3. Effectiveness & added value

Effectiveness, added value and attracting quality projects derive from smooth application processes – calls with clear objectives that are easy to understand, application processes that are efficient, far reaching through good communication to stakeholders and transparency of the evaluation process. This section discusses these procedures.

3.3.1. The role of national agencies

According to stakeholders, **some NAs lack a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities** in terms of communication and coordination efforts that needs to be remedied by EACEA by proactively overseeing and supporting NAs in aligning their practices with established standards. This would promote consistency, coherence and effective communication by NAs, ultimately enhancing the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the programme. Regular monitoring would also facilitate the identification of areas where additional guidance or support may be required, enabling timely interventions to address any gaps or challenges in NAs' communication and coordination activities.

3.3.2. The mechanics of implementation

In the survey, national agencies and wider stakeholders were on the whole positive about a range of issues related to the mechanics of implementation, such as whether the processes are simpler and more timely, and around the call and award processes. Nevertheless, there are clearly areas of weakness.

Both survey groups were asked to determine to what extent they considered the 2021-2027 processes to be **simpler** (in terms of proposal and grant preparation) and **timely** (in terms of grant approval) compared to the previous 2014-2020 programme. **The wider stakeholders were more likely to feel positive** about these aspects than the NAs, but in both cases the most positivity centred on the proposal preparation and submission process (33% of NAs and 47% of the wider stakeholders agreed that this was the case) rather than the grant preparation process or the time to award the grant. Corresponding figures for grant preparation were 21% and 38%. For the time taken to award the grant, the figures were 13% and 25% – i.e. only low percentages thought that there had been improvements in this area. In fact, in the case of the NAs, **the percentage disagreeing exceeded those agreeing in relation to the proposal preparation and submission time and the time to award grants**. In the case of both groups surveyed, it was the time taken to award grants about which respondents were most negative (with 46% of NAs and 23% of wider stakeholders disagreeing that there had been an improvement.)

Nevertheless, there appears to be **some implicit recognition that the procedures are necessary**: 41% of survey participants agreed (to a large or very large extent) that the efforts needed for a proposal submission were proportionate given the volume of funding requested. Around 19% agreed that the two-step proposal process has improved the efficiency of the proposal process. This is 38% of those who responded to this question, as more than half did not, presumably because they had no experience.

Looking at other aspects of implementation, **national agencies were particularly positive about the clarity of the aims and objectives of the calls**, with 40% rating them as satisfactory to a very large extent and 27% rating them as satisfactory to a large extent – i.e. a total of two thirds (67%). At least half gave very or largely satisfactory ratings to the quality of their own communication (62%), transparency of the funding decisions (56%), the fairness of the evaluation process (55%), the clarity of the programme announcements and calls (55%), the quality of the Commission's communication (55%), the clarity of the award criteria (50%) and the clarity of the information on the evaluation process (55%).

They were less likely to agree (fully or partially) about the clarity of the relevant funding opportunities (46%), the timeliness of decision-making (41%), the completeness of the evaluation reports (38%), the clarity of the administrative requirements (26%), the user-friendliness of the proposal template (24%) and the adequacy of the number of pages requested (16%). They were **particularly negative about the user-friendliness of the proposal template**, with 17% considering that it is “not at all” satisfactory.

Wider stakeholders were also particularly positive about the clarity and aims of the calls, with 69% agreeing with this to a large or very large extent. Two other aspects achieved positive ratings from more than half the respondents: the clarity of the programme announcements and calls, and the quality of the national agency's and the Commission's communication, all of which achieved positive ratings of 51% and above, so that the 62% rating that the national agencies gave to their own communication appears not to be too much of an overstatement as a result of natural bias. The clarity of the award criteria achieved 50%.

In declining order after this aspect came the fairness of the evaluation process (48%), the clarity of the administrative requirements (45%), the completeness of the evaluation reports (42%), the transparency of the funding decisions (39%), the adequacy of the length requested of proposals (34%), the clarity of the information on the evaluation process (33%), the timeliness of decision-making (32%) and **the user-friendliness of the proposal template (31%), with 10% saying they were not at all satisfied with the user-friendliness of the proposal template**, the highest “not at all” on the list. This suggests that despite the Commission's attempts to make it easier to applying for funding, there are still major issues around the proposal template.

There are differences between the results from the two groups, but also some **clear commonalities: efforts towards improved communication and clarity in calls and award criteria is recognised**. However, national agencies are more likely than stakeholders to think that there is clarity around the evaluation process, with only one third of stakeholders believing that there is clarity; this suggests room for improvement. At the negative end of the spectrum, the user-friendliness of the proposal template is clearly an issue. NAs are more concerned than stakeholders by the number of pages that a proposal must run to (perhaps because it is they who are faced with the cumulative volume of pages to evaluate).

EU programmes as a whole have been widely criticised over the years for the complex and time-consuming processes involved in applying for grants. The survey for this study confirmed that **it**

remains time-consuming to apply for Erasmus+ funding and that **applicants often cannot apply without external support**.

In terms of **time taken to prepare a proposal**, half the respondents said this takes more than 20 person days (29% who said it takes 20-30 days and 21% who said it takes more than 30). Just over one third (34%) said it takes 15-20 person days; the remaining 15% said it takes less. Without a norm and the ability to establish a correlation with particular calls, it is not possible to say what constitutes a good result, but 30+ person-days, which is an unremunerated investment in an uncertain outcome, appears high.

Overall, most participants, who were categorised as individuals or representing a small-scale **organisation of less than 20 people, required some support** to apply for the programme. This accounted for 45% of the participants, followed by 35% who found this question “not applicable” in their case. The remaining 20% instead applied independently without the support of others.

In evidence from stakeholders collected for this study, the EACEA is criticised by stakeholder organisations for not providing enough tailored support. Stakeholders recommended that there should be more support for the applicants in the different stages of the proposal – e.g. by means of clearer guidelines, having a more active helpdesk and organising training sessions. The need is borne out by the data above on the extent to which applicants use external support (which runs the risk that they will not internalise the expertise and will continue to remain dependent on external support with the costs that implies).

Some stakeholders are also critical of EACEA for not adequately monitoring the activity of national agencies to ensure that the rules are interpreted identically in all participating countries, that project evaluation practices are homogenous, and that national agencies do not ‘**gold-plate**’ – i.e. by requiring⁷⁷ detailed documentation in support of lump sums that is not required.

Stakeholders also **suggested a manual or guidance with best practice clarifying the financial reporting requirements** and how to identify and prevent projects from facing risks or failing. They do not find the current requirements and expectations of financial reporting clear and believe this should be addressed by means of a comprehensive manual or guidance document on formats and the documentation required, illustrating best practice, potential risks and challenges that projects may encounter, offering practical advice and preventive measures to mitigate these risks and avoid project failure.

During the consultation process stakeholders pointed out that they incur costs from not being able to book travel in advance and generally face complications in travel because deadlines for announcements are not met and contracts are not provided on time.

Other barriers to greater effectiveness raised by stakeholders included:

- The complexity of the youth component of the programme (for a target group with little or no prior knowledge of participating in European grant programmes);
- The focus of the programme guidance on outlining the general objectives to be achieved, leading to applications that are too rigid and innovation-averse;
- The lack of budget available for accreditation processes, particularly for schools⁷⁸;

⁷⁷ It is not possible to know whether stakeholders were aware at the time of their comments of the *Handbook on the Lump Sum*, available at: <https://www.erasmusplus.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Handbook-on-KA2-lump-sum-2023.pdf> published in 2023.

⁷⁸ While inevitably there were stakeholders who wanted more budget overall or for different types of programmes, this request appeared worth highlighting in particular.

- The lack of cross-border cooperation;
- IT systems that deal with operating grants as if they are projects, while in fact they have a different purpose (capacity-building of organisations);
- The uneven quality of evaluations of operating grants because of a failure to understand that they are not measured by outputs and results in the same way as project grants, but by improvements in organisational capacity.

3.3.3. The benefits of Erasmus+

When the wider stakeholder group were asked to explain to what extent the individual or organisation benefited from participating in Erasmus+, three benefits stand out in the results with ratings of above 70% from those who see these as benefits to a very large or a large extent:

Erasmus+ participants improve participants' non-formal and informal learning mobility; Erasmus+ participation encourages the participation of young people in democratic processes; Erasmus+ participation encourages civic engagement and promotion of inclusion and diversity (73% in each case).

Survey respondents also thought that Erasmus+ participation improves the quality of education, training and youth work (a rating of 70%). Survey respondents agreed to a somewhat lesser extent that learning mobility, historically the core of Erasmus+ activity, is a benefit gained from participation. This expected benefit as a result of participation in the programme scored 66%, two-thirds of respondents.

Other benefits gained from Erasmus+ participation with which more than half agreed were increasing the strength and resilience of communities and increasing citizen engagement (both 60%), teaching, research and policy debate, and the positive development of European cultural and linguistic diversity (both 53%).

The views on the contribution to sport were particularly negative (with 46% believing there is no contribution to sport staff mobility and 36% believing there is no contribution to promoting sport and physical activity). Many stakeholders were not convinced of the contribution to an improved collective memory of defining moments, with 24% saying that there is no contribution at all and 25% that the contribution is limited. They were also very uncertain about the contribution to the digital transition. Only 14% felt there was no contribution or it was small while 38% felt there was a very large or large benefit. Those who answered that the benefit is moderate (39%) comprise a comparatively large group of 'fence-sitters'.

3.4. Digitalisation & IT tools

The Erasmus+ platform⁷⁹ is the EU portal for the organisations to register and submit applications for grants. The platform also offers a support guide for potential applicants in the form of a wiki⁸⁰, which refers to the national agencies for questions. Once a proposal is submitted, applications are evaluated by the national agencies and the organisations are informed on the outcome of the application via the platform.

Simplification is one of the objectives of Erasmus+ and digitalisation and IT tools should help achieve this aim. However, the research carried out for this study suggests that this is a slow process and one that affects the application process, reporting and implementation tools.

⁷⁹ Available at: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-esc/index/>

⁸⁰ <https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=33530516>

According to Erasmus+ position papers, both potential applicants and beneficiaries of Erasmus+ grants face administrative burdens and cumbersome processes at least in parts of the administrative requirements. For example, prospective applicant organisations wishing to register their entity on the Funding & Tenders Portal in order to submit an Erasmus+ application can face several months to finalise this process in order for their Legal Entity Appointed Representative⁸¹ to be validated as part of the process. Beneficiaries of Erasmus+ funding are required to enter the same information twice but into different platforms – once at application stage and once during the grant agreement preparation.

The results of the survey carried out for this study also indicate that there is room for improvement.

In the application process, both NAs and wider stakeholders agreed that **the ability to express a language preference was positive**: 56% of NAs and 76% of wider stakeholders fully or partially agreed, an understandable split given that the NAs are more likely to be proficient in other languages than the organisations, particularly the smaller ones.

On the application process and the administrative burden, the NAs were more likely to be positive about other developments than the wider stakeholders. However, this was negligible as the numbers show that **neither NAs nor the wider stakeholders think that simplification is delivering**. Although 35% of the NAs agreed that the application process is easy, 39% felt it had eased the administrative burden and 30% felt the process was user-friendly, this needs to be set against the share of NAs partially or fully disagreeing with each of these hypotheses. Not only were the numbers significantly higher – i.e. 47%, 52% and 61%. However, those fully disagreeing outnumbered those who partially disagreed each time.

In fact, the NAs were more negative about these aspects than the wider stakeholders. Of the wider stakeholders, the percentages fully or partially disagreeing that the application process is easy, had eased the administrative burden or was user-friendly were 34%, 37% and 44% – i.e. figures for those partially or fully disagreeing that were between 12 and 15 percentage points lower than in the case of the NAs. The share of stakeholders therefore seeing the processes as easy, as easing the administrative burden and as being user-friendly were correspondingly higher at 47%, 38% and 48%, but nevertheless never a majority.

The reporting platforms are equally disliked: 70% of NAs fully or partially disagreed that they are user-friendly; 48% of the wider stakeholders shared this view. In fact, the reporting requirements themselves are also regarded as disproportionate by a significant number of NAs (50%), while only 18% find them proportionate (and the remainder neither agree nor disagree or did not reply). **The stakeholders are more tolerant of the reporting platform**, as the corresponding figures were 30% and 48%. Stakeholders did comment, however, that the requirements should be (further) simplified. They would also like to know at an earlier stage, i.e. in the kick-off phase, what is expected of them in terms of reporting in order to be able to plan properly. The experience to date is that the information session on this is held only after some months.

As the NAs and beneficiaries interact with different parts of the system, further research would be needed to assess whether the more negative views of the NAs is the result of attention to the interfaces for beneficiaries having been at the expense of the interfaces for NAs, since the systems are somewhat less disliked by stakeholders than NAs.

Comments from **NAs suggested they thought the new tools had been released without thorough testing**. Some of the NAs said that the low quality of IT tools had increased their administrative burden.

⁸¹ All organisations that receive funding from an EU-funded project must assign a person to this role.

NAs specifically highlighted issues faced by beneficiaries when working with Excel documents and limitations in the reporting system.

On the stakeholder side, **those involved in smaller projects were most likely to find the tools complex**. This has a spillover effect on diversity as it is a deterrent to applying. Some stakeholders commented on lagging and system errors, which resulted in duplication of work and increased administrative burden. They felt clearer instructions were needed on how to use the IT tools and implement necessary system updates. Additionally, implementing robust quality assurance measures was seen as vital to mitigate the risks associated with copy-pasting and maintain the accuracy and integrity of the reported data.

Opinions were also mixed on online language support (OLS) tool, the Quality Label (QL) application process, the beneficiary module (BM) and the project management module (PMM),

In the case of the **OLS**, the issues go beyond the user-friendliness of the tools to whether they are the right tools in the case of young people, who are more familiar with learning languages through apps or physical classes. Complex languages with intricate grammatical rules were particularly challenging for participants using the OLS tool.

While the wider stakeholder groups tended to see the **QL** application process relatively positively, with some participants finding the process clear and straightforward, a significant proportion of participants had limited awareness of the quality label application process. This lack of awareness is a potential risk if prospective beneficiaries submit applications that do not fully respond to the QL application process.

Some stakeholders found the **BM** tool effective in supporting project monitoring and budget management, while others found it hard to use and perceived a lack of fluidity and clarity. Participants suggested implementing interactive error messages within the tool to help users identify and resolve data entry errors independently, reducing the need for constant contact with national agencies.

Equally, some stakeholders considered the **PMM** tool effective and user-friendly for project management, while others found it inconvenient and ineffective. As in the case of the QM application process, usage is being constrained by limited awareness of the tool, suggesting that there are communication issues which go beyond the user-friendliness of the tool.

4. REPERCUSSIONS OF EXTERNAL FACTORS

KEY FINDINGS

- Recovery from COVID-19 has impacted NAs and stakeholders more than Brexit or Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. Of the last two, NAs have felt the impacts of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine more than Brexit, while the picture is reversed for stakeholders.
- The economic crisis and rising costs are having a major impact, with stakeholders worried that the Commission is not taking enough measures to compensate them despite the measures already taken.

4.1. The COVID-19 pandemic and recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic clearly posed a challenge for the launch of the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 programme. It negatively impacted the mobility of the stakeholders and the beneficiaries of Erasmus+ due to travel restrictions, especially in regards to mobility under KA1, which showed a 36% decrease in 2021.⁸²

Nevertheless, EUR 2.9 billion were allocated to 19,000 projects that involved 648,640 learners.⁸³ Grant deadlines were extended and grant agreements were amended; projects were monitored remotely⁸⁴. Special provision was made to ensure that the impact of the pandemic was cost-neutral for beneficiaries and organisations⁸⁵. Two calls in 2020 and implemented in 2021 and each backed by EUR 100 million were issued in specific response to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on digital education and creativity⁸⁶. Participants and organisations shifted activities from face-to-face events to online or blended mode. Eligibility for DiscoverEU was extended to an older-than-usual cohort that was unable to travel during COVID-19.⁸⁷ A European Youth Together call in June 2021 for small lump sum grants included measures to mitigate the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 as one of the criteria.⁸⁸

⁸² EC, 2021, 2021 annual work programme "Erasmus+": the Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, available at: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/2021-annual-work-programme-erasmus-the-union-programme-for-education-training-youth-and-sport> (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁸³ EC, 2021, 2021 annual work programme "Erasmus+": the Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, available at: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/2021-annual-work-programme-erasmus-the-union-programme-for-education-training-youth-and-sport> (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁸⁴ EC, 2022, EACEA Annual Activity Report, 2021, Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-05/annual-activity-report-2021-eacea_en.pdf

⁸⁵ Coronavirus – questions raised by Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps beneficiary organisations.

⁸⁶ EC, 2020, Coronavirus Response: Extraordinary Erasmus+ Calls to Support Digital Education Readiness and Creative Skills, available at: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/news/coronavirus-response-extraordinary-erasmus-calls-to-support-digital-education-readiness-and-creative-skills-0>

⁸⁷ EC, 2022, Announcement of the DiscoverEU results, available at: https://youth.europa.eu/d8/node/32092_en

⁸⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-search;callCode=ERASMUS-YOUTH-2021-YOUTH-TOG;freeTextSearchKeyword=;matchWholeText=true;typeCodes=1;statusCodes=31094501,31094502,31094503;programmePeriod=null;programCcm2Id=43353764;programDivisionCode=null;focusAreaCode=null;destinationGroup=null;missionGroup=null;geographicalZonesCode=null;programmeDivisionProspect=null;startDateLte=null;startDateGte=null;crossCuttingPriorityCode=null;cpvCode=null;performanceOfDelivery=null;sortQuery=sortStatus;orderBy=asc;onlyTenders=false;topicListKey=callTopicSearchTableState.e>

This is the only call found by searching for COVID within Erasmus on the Funding and Tenders portal.

An issue to which increasing attention is being paid in the wake of COVID-19 is the impact it has had on the mental health of children, young adults, students and those who teach them, as pointed out in the Parliament's resolution of September 2022 on the **impact of COVID-19 closures of educational, cultural, youth and sports activities on children and young people in the EU**.⁸⁹ While not addressed in detail in Erasmus+ annual work programmes and only mentioned in passing in the work programmes for 2021 and 2023, the 2023 work programme⁹⁰ does specifically mention support to the mental health of students and academics in relation to building a more inclusive higher education system. No other age groups are mentioned, contrary to the broad scope of the Parliament resolution. However, the EACEA has started to look at how the mental health of young people is affected in an Erasmus+ study of Member State policy responses.⁹¹

Of the three issues looked at in this chapter, the post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery, Brexit and the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that **the post-COVID-19 recovery has had the greatest impact**. It was the only category where national agencies felt there had been an impact to a very large extent (52%), followed by 7% who felt that it had an impact to a large extent – i.e. 59% in total. The wider shareholders were in agreement, though the same 59% total for the two categories split differently (38% and 21%), so that the feeling was not held as strongly among the wider shareholders.

By way of comparison, 26% of NAs believed that Brexit had had an impact to a large extent and 15% felt that about Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine (with none perceiving that these had had an impact to a very large extent). The wider stakeholders were more likely to hold stronger views on the impact of these issues: 37% believed that there had to a very large or large extent been an impact from Brexit and 32% felt the same about the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine. Some 10% reported that Brexit had had a very large impact and 9% thinking that of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. Thus, overall, **the NAs felt that there had been more of an impact from Brexit, while stakeholders felt there had been more of an impact from the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine**.

4.2. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU and its Member States have condemned the offensive and affirmed their solidarity with Ukraine.⁹² The EU's support to Ukraine has been translated into several restrictive and supportive measures, including those related to the Erasmus+ 2021-2027 programme. In particular, the Council decided to suspend the EU-Russia visa facilitation agreement⁹³, which de facto

⁸⁹ EP, 2022, European Parliament, *The impact of COVID-19 closures of educational, cultural, youth and sports activities on children and young people in the EU*, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0314_EN.html

⁹⁰ EC, 2023; *Amendment of the 2023 annual work programme "Erasmus+": the Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport*, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-03/erasmusplus-awp-review-mar23_en.pdf

⁹¹ EC (EACEA), 2022, *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of young people Policy responses in European countries*, available at: <https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/media/275/download>

⁹² EU, n.d., Council of the European Union, n.d., *EU response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine*, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-response-ukraine-invasion/> (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁹³ EU, n.d. Council of the European Union, 2022, *Council adopts full suspension of visa facilitation with Russia*, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/09/09/council-adopts-full-suspension-of-visa-facilitation-with-russia/> (accessed 5 July 2023).

prevents Russians from participating in any of the Erasmus+ mobility actions; in April 2022, ongoing grant agreements with Russian organisations were terminated.⁹⁴

As many Ukrainians fled to EU Member States – 4 million people had temporary protection in March 2023⁹⁵ – the European Commission devised concrete actions for the EU Member States to welcome and meet their needs.⁹⁶ Particular attention was given to the issue of education, which is addressed as a priority area for EU Cohesion Policy funds and Erasmus+.⁹⁷

In order to respond to the migration flow challenge, the Erasmus+ programme revised in March 2023 the annual work programme 2023, which emphasised that Ukraine as a focus area across all projects, and allocated EUR 100 million for Ukrainians citizens under the Erasmus+, raising the overall budget to EUR 4.43 billion.⁹⁸ Moreover, in the framework of the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion⁹⁹, all key actions and their specific priorities earmark a specific focus on Ukrainian learners, teachers, trainers and organisations in order to ensure continuous learning for both children and adults, to prevent early school leaving and to facilitate access to work opportunities, as well as to mitigate the psychological effects of the war, especially on children. For example, priority 7 of KA2, *Supporting the Pact for Skills*,¹⁰⁰ contributes to the reskilling of people, *with a particular view to integrate refugees from Ukraine into the labour market*. Likewise, strand 3 of the capacity building in higher education¹⁰¹ action also aims to create an *open educational digital environment*, which would offer quality education to Ukrainian refugees and internally displaced students. In addition, mobilities in the field of sports would contribute to the process of integration and social inclusion of Ukrainian refugees into EU Member States, as well as contribute positively to the health of Ukrainian refugees.

As noted in the previous section, national agencies and especially wider stakeholders believe that the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has had a significant (i.e. very large or large) impact on Erasmus+, but not as great an impact as recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.3. The UK's withdrawal from the European Union (Brexit)

Despite the recognition by the UK House of Lords in 2019 of the significant impact that being unable to access the Erasmus programme could have on *mobility opportunities for people in the UK to study, train, teach and gain experience abroad*,¹⁰² the UK decided not to take part in Erasmus+ as an associated

⁹⁴ EC, 2022, Termination of cooperation with Russian public entities in research and education, available at: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/termination-of-cooperation-with-russian-public-entities-in-research-and-education>

⁹⁵ EU, n.d. Council of the European Union, n.d., Infographic - Refugees from Ukraine in the EU, available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/ukraine-refugees-eu/> (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁹⁶ EC, 2022, EC communication: Welcoming those fleeing war in Ukraine - readying Europe to meet the needs, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/index.php/news/ec-communication-welcoming-those-fleeing-war-ukraine-readying-europe-meet-needs_en (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁹⁷ Ibidem.

⁹⁸ Moving Forward Together, 2023, The European Commission allocates EUR 100 million for Ukrainians under the Erasmus+ programme, available at: <https://eu4ukraine.eu/en/media-en/publications-en/100-million-euros-for-ukrainians-as-part-of-the-erasmus-program-en.html> (accessed 5 July 2023).

⁹⁹ EC, 2020, The EC reveals its new EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027), available at: https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/ec-reveals-its-new-eu-action-plan-integration-and-inclusion-2021-2027_en#:~:text=The%20current%20action%20plan%20proposes%20concrete%20actions%2C%20gives,continued%20language%20learning%2C%20with%20support%20from%20EU%20funds (accessed 5 July 2023).

¹⁰⁰ EC, 2021, 2021 annual work programme "Erasmus+": the Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, available at: <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/document/2021-annual-work-programme-erasmus-the-union-programme-for-education-training-youth-and-sport> (accessed 5 July 2023).

¹⁰¹ This action supports international cooperation projects based on multilateral partnerships between organisations active in the higher education field in EU Member States or third countries associated to the programme and third countries not associated to the Programme. Three specific strands are available within the CBHE action.

¹⁰² UK Parliament, 2019, *Brexit: the Erasmus and Horizon programmes*, available at:

third country following its withdrawal on 30 January 2021. While all projects in which the UK was a partner that started in 2019 and 2020 could be completed before 2022, from 2021 onwards the UK could only participate in actions of the Erasmus+ programme open to non-associated countries.

As a result, UK students can apply for Erasmus Mundus scholarships and UK higher education institutions are eligible for Jean Monnet activities. There are dedicated budgets for Japan and the UK (jointly) for Jean Monnet teaching modules and Jean Monnet chairs at higher education institutions, which promote the study of European integration. Non-associated countries can also take part in virtual exchanges in higher education and youth, capacity-building programmes in education and training, youth and sport, peer-to-peer higher education networks.^{103 104}

The UK has replaced the Erasmus+ programme with the UK Turing Scheme, which will provide study mobility opportunities all over the world for up to 35,000 UK students.¹⁰⁵ The scheme is a 'one-way street', meaning that it does not offer the same opportunities to EU students to go to the UK.

In the stakeholder input collected for this study, one major organisation regretted that the UK decided not to take part in Erasmus+ and called for both the UK and Switzerland to rejoin as soon as possible.

As noted in the first previous section, national agencies and especially wider stakeholders believe that Brexit has had a significant (i.e. very large or large) impact on Erasmus+, but not as great an impact as recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.4. The economic crisis

The economic crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has tested the resilience and solidarity of the Union, bringing with it socio-economic challenges that have been deepened by the impacts of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine.¹⁰⁶ One of the repercussions has been inflation, to which Erasmus+ has responded with increases in support rates for individuals and increases in grant spans.

Among the key findings obtained from the survey is the satisfaction with the measures implemented expressed by most NAs (56%), while the majority of wider stakeholders (73%) disagreed. Moreover, some NAs also feared that the increases will not keep up with rising costs. Those NAs critical of measures criticised them for not adequately taking rising unit costs into account (i.e. in travelling and accommodation) and not updating the budget of the current contracts. This could affect the ability of some to complete their projects.

The majority of the wider stakeholders who deemed the measures used by the European and National bodies as ineffective agreed with this point. However, most of the wider general stakeholders (48%) believe that the funding available is sufficiently flexible¹⁰⁷ to allow for the project activities to be carried out, and a further 35% were in moderate agreement. Projects financed by lump sums or running over a long period were those thought most likely to be able to adapt.

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldeduc/283/28302.htm> (accessed 5 July 2023).

¹⁰³ The UK and Erasmus+.

¹⁰⁴ EC, 2022, *Erasmus Programme Guide 2023 (Version 2)*, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-01/ErasmusplusProgramme-Guide2023-v2_en.pdf

¹⁰⁵ Department for Education, 2020, *A new £100 million scheme for students to study and work abroad will replace the UK's participation in Erasmus+*, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-turing-scheme-to-support-thousands-of-students-to-study-and-work-abroad> (accessed 5 July 2023).

¹⁰⁶ See inter alia the section on ERASMUS+ AND THE RESILIENCE AND SOLIDARITY OF THE UNION in the Erasmus+ 2020 Work Programme, Version 2, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-03/erasmusplus-awp-review-mar23_en.pdf#page=48&zoom=100,90,572

¹⁰⁷ From very to a large extent

5. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF ERASMUS+

KEY FINDINGS

- 80% of Erasmus+ participants are employed less than three months after their graduation.
- Erasmus+ programme makes the European Union more resilient to address socio-economic challenges.
- Despite the budget increase, Erasmus grants do not completely meet the additional costs of studying abroad.
- Administrative procedures for application and reporting are considered a burden for applicants.

The strengths of Erasmus+ 2021-2027 include its overarching position as a programme which has stood the test of time (more than 35 years) and become a recognised brand, particularly among students. There has been criticism in the past, including from the European Parliament, that it focuses too much on higher education. The breakdown between the number of beneficiaries from higher education and vocational, adult, primary and secondary education still favours those in higher education, but the gap has been narrowed. The youth and sport strands have been progressively strengthened, but mobility for those in education remains the focus.

In budgetary terms, Erasmus+ 2021-2027 has got off to a strong start, with very high levels of budget consumption in 2021-2022 despite a delayed start to the programme. The budget for the first two years was spent almost in full and the number of calls issued and grants awarded was in line with targets.

To address past criticism that it is excessively bureaucratic, Erasmus 2021-2027 introduces a range of simplification measures, such as two-stage proposals and lump sums, and small-scale partnerships, that have been welcomed. There has been a marked effort to provide clarity about the aims of calls and on communication around those calls.

There has been recognition that in the post-COVID recovery phase, particular attention needed to be paid to those at risk of being left behind as a result of lockdowns and the need to create more space for virtual and blended learning, both as a means of catching-up and in acknowledgement of the contribution hybrid and virtual learning can make to complement physical mobility.

The 2021-2027 programme has digital and green strands which reflect the political priorities of the 2019-2025 European Commission. The third priority is inclusion and diversity, which addressed criticism of the past, including by the European Parliament, that the programme primarily benefits the well-resourced.

Erasmus+ 2021-2027 has adapted to the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine by creating opportunities for learners and teachers from Ukraine; it has adapted to rising costs with measures to compensate for these. Any impact from Brexit has been easily absorbed.

The weaknesses of Erasmus+ 2021-2027 often relate to measures that are appreciated but are felt not to go far enough, in particular the amount of funding for youth and sport.

While there is an effort to build more inclusion and diversity across the board, and there are top-up payments for those with fewer opportunities, taking up an Erasmus+ opportunity is still easier for those

who can top up the grants themselves or who can take up a mobility opportunity without having to worry about whether they will receive the grants before they leave.

The playing field is also not level in terms of the national agencies' approaches to coordination, communication, evaluation of project and interpretation of requirements as these vary across participating countries.

Despite simplification, applying for Erasmus+ support remains a time-consuming (and therefore costly) and complex process, which may well be deterring applicants from applying and means that smaller organisations need to pay for external support. Uncertainty about announcement deadlines actually being met or delays in contracting complicate organisations' planning and can put them at financial risk. Stakeholders feel a need for more guidance and support, including on the application process and reporting. Finally, there are significant start-up problems with the new IT systems and tools, which are so far not delivering on promises of user-friendliness.

Table 3 summarises the findings obtained from national agencies and wider stakeholders with regards to the overall strengths and weaknesses of the programme.

Table 3: Summary of the survey findings

Strengths	Weaknesses
Early implementation of the Erasmus+ programme	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Stakeholders deemed the Commission's and NAs' communication activities as effective. – The programme's announcements and calls, as well as the aims and objectives of these calls and administrative requirements were clear according to the surveyed wider stakeholders. – In terms of the evaluation process, respondents confirmed that the quality of information, its fairness and transparency of the funding decisions were overall satisfactory. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Participants heavily criticised the user experience of the programme due to IT problems, the design of the proposal template and the administrative burden.
Budget and resources	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Survey participants were overall pleased on the budget distribution and the financial management at the programme level. – Wider stakeholders were satisfied by the funding schemes, as they were clear and adequate for the needs of their project. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – NAs expressed that the continuous increase in prices meant that additional costs could not be covered, which could mean that some entities may not be able to implement projects anymore.
EU priorities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Both survey groups deemed that the EU priorities of the Green Deal, Gender Equality and Digital Transformation be present within the aspects of the Erasmus programme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – According to the wider stakeholder group the Green Deal and Gender Equality priorities are less embedded into the programme than the Digital Transformation priority.
Effectiveness & added value	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – NAs confirmed that overall their country's projects were on track to deliver their objectives on time. – The wider stakeholder group agreed that their participation increased citizens' engagement, as well as promoted inclusion and diversity. – The programme's contribution to the Digital Transformation, as well as the quality of education, training and youth systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The approach to outlining general objectives in the programme guide leads to less innovative solutions as applicants tend to address what is being requested by the Commission and NAs. – Different NAs have distinct evaluation criteria, which can lead to organisational inconsistency and confusion.
Application process	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Participants agreed that the efforts needed for a proposal submission were proportional to the volume of the funding required. – Participants who had an experience with the two-stage proposal process and its efficiency were generally satisfied. – From the wider stakeholder group perspective, the contracting procedure and tools were generally user-friendly and were managed in a timely manner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The project application procedure is overly complex. – Lack of necessary support within the different application stages. – Technical issues due to IT tools have been a barrier. – Lack of support for travel and accommodation costs. – The 2014-2020 grant preparation was simpler than the current one.
Digitalisation and IT tools	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – According to the wider stakeholder group, QS and PMM were the most effective IT tools in comparison to the OLS and the BM, although no IT tools were considered fully satisfactory. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – IT tools were overall faulty, leading to high administrative burden for the participants and creating a negative user experience during the application process. – The user experience of the reporting platform was described as inconvenient. As a result, the reporting requirements for project management and/or monitoring were considered as disproportionate.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations can be formulated based on the analysis above:

Recommendation 1: Strengthen coordination to ensure a common understanding of Erasmus+ rules

More coordination across the NAs driven by and monitored by the European Commission would lead to more consistent interpretation of the rules across the NAs and prevent NAs requiring documentation or input difficult for small organisations to obtain, while standardising the quality of evaluations across participating countries. As part of this effort, the European Commission should ensure NAs and their evaluators have a clear understanding, possibly via specific guidance, of the difference between project grants and operating grants, as the capacity-building objective of operating grants that differentiates them from project grants is not well understood.

Recommendation 2: Pursue further simplification

Simplification measures under the current programme (e.g. lump sums and the two-step proposal process) have been welcomed, but there is further scope for simplification, including the proposal form, and more straightforward guidance in plain language.

Recommendation 3: Address IT issues

Issues with the new platform should be addressed as a matter of urgency as there is a risk of potential applicants being deterred from applying. Detailed research is needed into the extent of the problem of 'bugs' in a new system and the intrinsic difficulties in using the platform interface. Stakeholders believe that the interface needs simplifying and optimisation of features would make data entry and retrieval more user-friendly. The Commission should also investigate whether NAs having a more negative view of the IT systems since stakeholders indicate that the interface for NAs is even more problematic than that for beneficiaries or applicants. The Beneficiary Module (BM), Online language support (OLS) and the Project Management Module (PMM) appear to pose particular problems, at least in terms of lack of user-friendliness. In the case of the OLS model, its suitability for use by young people is in itself questionable, and this should be explored further.

Recommendation 4: Incentive inclusion in Erasmus+

Stakeholders consulted for this study emphasised the importance of fully accomplishing the inclusion ambitions outlined in project proposals and highlighting them in final reports. To this end, the European Commission could consider establishing European targets, accompanied by impact indicators, and a wider incentive system to guide and incentivise countries' contributions towards achieving inclusion within the Erasmus+ programme.

Recommendation 5: Address timeliness

More certainty is needed on when decisions are taken and payments are made. Stakeholders not only feel that it takes too long for award decisions to be taken, but highlight uncertainties or delays in the timing of contracting and payments to beneficiaries that add to their administrative burden and complicates financial planning, which is particularly detrimental to small organisations and newcomers, thus undermining inclusion and diversity ambitions.

Recommendation 6: Improve communication on little known platform features

Stakeholders appear to have a low awareness of the Quality Label and Project Management Modules. This should be addressed at national and EU levels.

Recommendation 7: Improve transparency of the proposal evaluation process

Applicants should be given more detailed feedback on the strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement of their applications. Time devoted to this would bear fruit in the form of better-quality applications in future. Information sessions on reporting requirements should be scheduled at the beginning of the project rather than waiting some months so projects can plan properly for their reporting.

Recommendation 8: Improve transparency of the portfolio of the projects funded

The European Commission could consider increasing the transparency and searchability of the Erasmus+ portal and funding and tender opportunities portal to allow stakeholders and external parties to download and analyse comprehensive project data. Currently, very limited analysis can be carried out at the project and country levels, which limits the transparency of allocated funding.

Recommendation 9: Reduce financial risk

Develop a comprehensive manual or guidance document containing clarification of the requirements and best practices for financial reporting to remove current uncertainty and perceived ambiguity about expectations. This should also cover financial risk management to mitigate the risk of projects failing because of financial problems.

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ANNEX 1: ERASMUS+ BUDGET OVERVIEW

According to Council Regulation 2020/2093 the budget available for 2021-2027 is EUR 26.3 billion made up of EUR 24.574 billion in current prices and a 'top-up' of EUR 1.7 billion in constant 2018 prices from the Commission's revenue from fines.¹⁰⁸

According to Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 the budget is even higher when presented in current prices and is made up of EUR 24.574 billion in current prices and a 'top-up' of EUR 1.938 billion in current prices from the Commission's revenue from fines (in total budget available for 2021-2027 is EUR 26.512 billion in current prices).¹⁰⁹ The breakdown of the budget according to the Multiannual Financial Framework is presented in the Table below.

Table 4: Breakdown of Erasmus+ budget for 2021-2027 (EUR billion)

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	Total
The amount foreseen in Regulation	2,663	3,116	3,292	3,475	3,663	3,858	4,507	24,574
In addition, allocation under MFFR Article 5 (illustrative annual breakdown)	-	307	313	319	326	332	341	1,938

Source: EC, 2021, Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 (in commitments) – Current prices, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/mff_2021-2027_breakdown_current_prices.pdf (accessed 5 July 2023).

The distribution of funds for the actions of the programme is determined by Article 17 of the Regulation, which sets out specific allocations for different policy areas and other expenses covered by the programme. The percentages specified in the Regulation are fixed and must be adhered to throughout the entire programming period of 2021-2027. However, it is important to acknowledge that, in accordance with the Regulation, the specified percentages of the total budget remain unchanged throughout the programme period from 2021 to 2027. Consequently, for a particular year of implementing the programme, strict adherence to these percentages may not be necessary due to potential reprogramming or shifts in political priorities. However, it is crucial to maintain the overall trend established by the percentages throughout the duration of the programme.

The budget allocation limits for Erasmus+ are outlined below.

¹⁰⁸ Council Regulation (EU, Euratom) 2020/2093 of 17 December 2020 laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2021 to 2027, available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020R2093&rid=3> (accessed 5 July 2023).

¹⁰⁹ EC, 2021, Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 (in commitments)- Current prices, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-01/mff_2021-2027_breakdown_current_prices.pdf (accessed 5 July 2023).

Table 5: Budget allocation limits for Erasmus+

		Erasmus+ 2021-2027	
		% of total budget	% of E&T budget
a. Education and training		83%	
	1) Higher education		Min. 34.6%
	2) Vocational education and training		Min. 21.5%
	3) School education		Min. 15.2%
	4) Adult education		Min. 5.8%
	5) Jean Monnet		Min. 1.8%
	Horizontal activities		Min. 17%
	Flexibility margin		4.1%
b. Youth		10.3%	
c. Sport		1.9%	
d. Operational costs of national agencies		Min. 3.3%	
e. Programme support		1.5%	

Source: *Amendment of the 2023 Annual Work Programme Erasmus+*, available at: https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2023-03/erasmusplus-awp-review-mar23_en.pdf

ANNEX 2: SURVEY BRIEFING

KEY FINDINGS

- Survey participants were overall satisfied with the programme's early implementation stage. The programme's evaluation process, quality of information, its fairness and transparency of the funding decisions were overall satisfactory.
- The user experience of the different IT tools was heavily criticised by the survey participants, leading to high administrative burden and creating difficulties during the application process.
- COVID-19 was the main external factor negatively affecting the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme. The measures used to adjust the programme's implementation were effective.
- The two survey groups (national agencies and wider stakeholders) had different opinions on the measures used by the Commission and of national agencies to tackle the costs faced from inflationary pressures. While national agencies (NAs) considered the measures used as effective, wider stakeholders, including beneficiaries of Erasmus+, believed there was lack of support, especially for travel and accommodation costs. Funding schemes were overall clear and adequate for the needs of the stakeholders' projects.
- The majority of the NAs considered the 2014-2020 programme edition simpler and timelier in comparison to the 2021-2027 programme. The wider stakeholder group, on the other hand, believed the opposite.
- Both survey groups deemed the three EU priorities (i.e. the Green Deal, Digital Transformation, Gender Equality) as present within the Erasmus+ programme.
- The Erasmus+ programme was considered to be overall effective and provide added value. Around 70% of the NAs argued that their country's projects were on track to deliver their objectives, while only 8.3% considered this not to be the case.
- The efforts needed for a proposal submission were proportional to the volume of the funding required. Participants who had an experience with the two-stage proposal process and its efficiency were generally satisfied.

Introduction

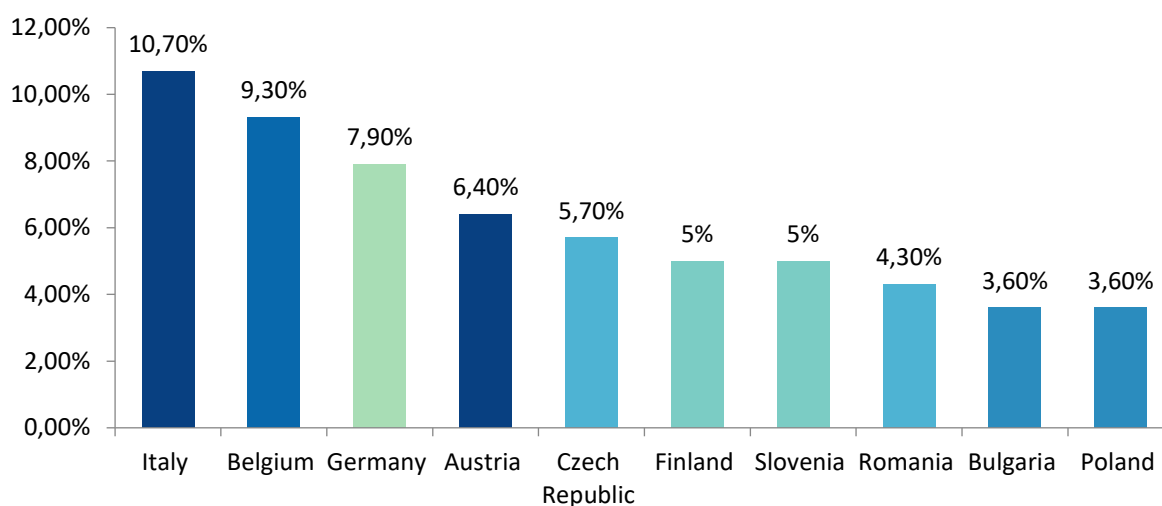
Annex 2 presents the full survey results of the questionnaires disseminated to the national agencies (NAs) and to wider stakeholders (including beneficiaries and other funded stakeholders) who were involved in the Erasmus+ programme. The aim of the survey was to collect data for the project EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in Culture, Media, Education, Youth and Sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives: Erasmus+’.

Two surveys were conducted for this study, one directed to NAs and the other to a wider range of stakeholders who are involved with the Erasmus+ programme. The survey for NAs received 49 responses and the survey for wider stakeholders 130 responses.

Background

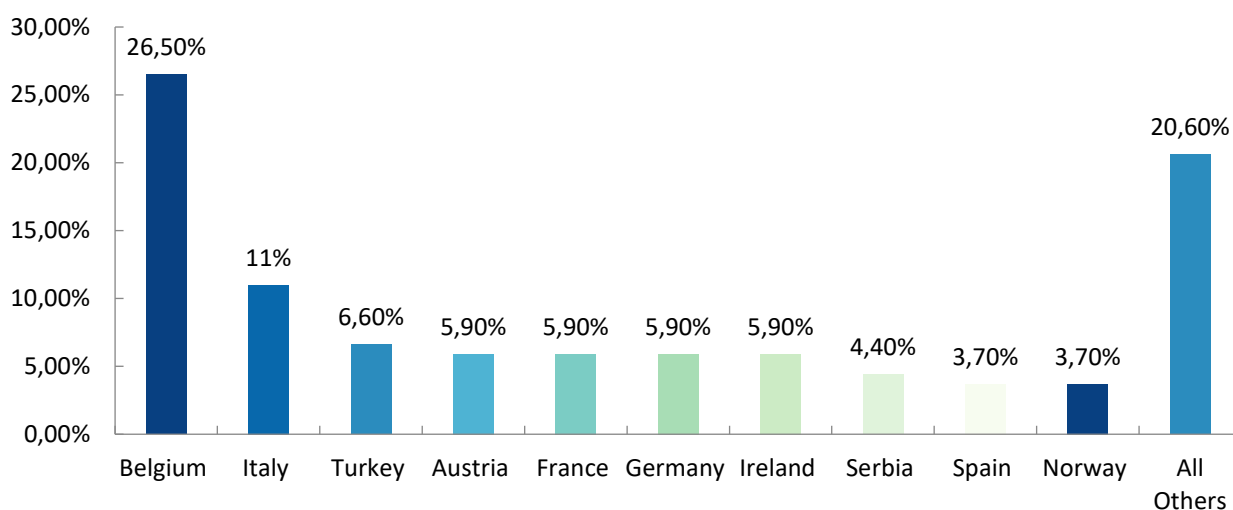
As seen in Figure 1, of the 49 Erasmus+ NAs that participated in the survey, the top countries represented were Italy, Belgium and Germany.

Figure 1: In which country are you located? - NAs

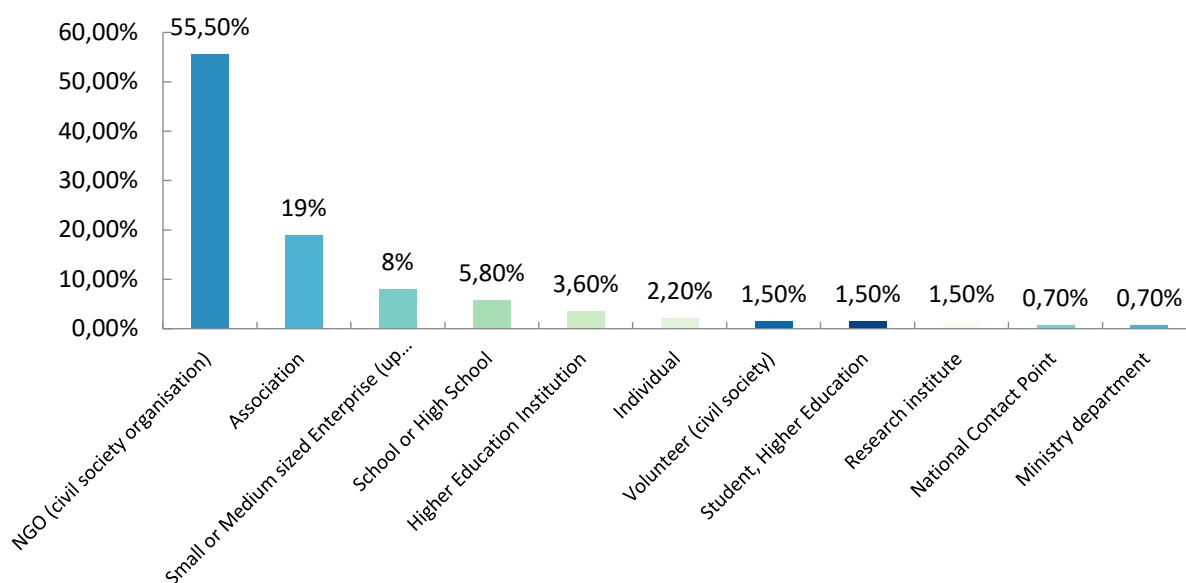


A similar survey of the NAs was disseminated to a wider range of stakeholders¹¹⁰ of the Erasmus+ programme. This survey received 130 responses, with most coming from Belgium (36), Italy (15), and Turkey (9), as shown in Figure 2.

¹¹⁰ Which represents both direct and indirect beneficiaries.

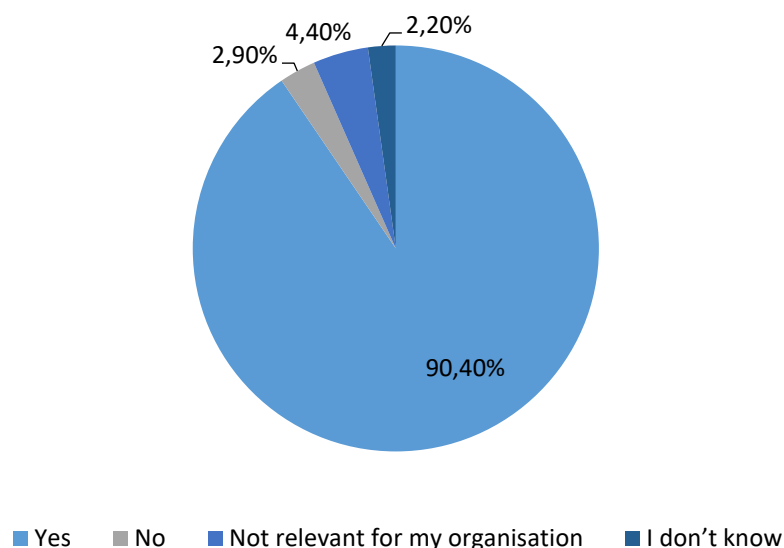
Figure 2: In which country are you located? – wider stakeholders

As shown in Figure 3, most of the respondents are NGOs (55.5%), followed by associations (19%) and small or medium sized enterprises (8%). Most of the respondents (91%) described themselves as direct or indirect beneficiaries of Erasmus+.

Figure 3: Organisation representation

Stakeholders were also asked about their involvement in Erasmus+, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: To the best of your knowledge, have you or your organisation ever applied for or participated in a project funded under any of these other programmes? – wider stakeholders



The reasons that the 3% of respondents stating 'No' gave for their answer were:

- Limited size and resources to apply
- Lack of eligibility requirements/coherent projects
- Unaware of the existence of the funding scheme

Early implementation

This section describes the results obtained for the questions asked on the early implementation of Erasmus+.

When consulted about the quality of the **Commission's communication activities** on the 2021-2027 programme, most NAs and wider stakeholders responded favourably, with 55% and 63% respectively answering that they found it satisfactory to a large or very large extent. When consulted on the **NAs communication activities**, 62% of NAs and 50% of the wider stakeholders answered to a large or very large extent. It should be duly recognised that the outcome of this question may contain a degree of subjectivity, as the NAs are the ones assessing themselves. However, this result indicates a recognition that there is room for improvement in their communication activities.

Regarding the **clarity of the programme announcements and calls**, both NAs (59%) and wider stakeholders (51%) responded that they were clear to a large or very large extent. In terms of the **clarity of the aims and objectives of the calls**, the positive perception rises to 67% for NAs and 69% for wider stakeholders.

However the **clarity of the relevant funding opportunities** over different programmes was perceived as lower for both survey groups: 35% of NAs and 32% of wider stakeholders believed it to be clear to a limited or moderate extent. Furthermore, when asked about the **clarity of administrative requirements**, the majority of the NAs responded negatively, with 58% indicating it to be clear to a

limited or moderate extent or and not at all¹¹¹. Similarly, 53% were satisfied to a limited or moderate extent or not at all with **the proportionality of the information required in the administrative proposal**.

By contrast, wider stakeholders responded positively both in relation to the **clarity of administrative requirements** (with 54% answering positively to a very or large extent) and the **proportionality of the information required in an administrative proposal** (40% answering very positively or to a large extent positively).

The **user-friendliness of the proposal template** received the largest amount of negative feedback across both survey groups, with 30% of NAs and 34% of wider stakeholders considering it not at all or, to a limited extent, user-friendly. Regarding the **adequacy of the proposal's length**, the NAs had more of a negative perception, as only 16% responded that it was adequate to a large or very large extent, and 34% responded not at all or to a limited extent. On the other hand, 36.9% of wider stakeholders responded the proposal's length was adequate to a large or very large extent.

Concerning the **evaluation process**, 55% of the NAs respondents and 33% of the wider stakeholders stated that the quality of the information for this process was highly satisfactory¹¹². Moreover, 50% of respondents in both groups had a favourable assessment of the **award criteria described in the work programmes**, stating that it was clear to a large or very large extent.

The **fairness of the evaluation process** and the **transparency of the funding decisions** were also regarded as satisfactory to a large or very large extent by the NAs (55%). Of the wider stakeholders, 39% were satisfied with the transparency of funding, while 48% were satisfied with the evaluation process's fairness to a large or very large extent. As for the **completeness of the evaluation reports**, 38% of the NAs¹¹³ and 42% of the wider stakeholders responded positively. Lastly, the timelines of the decision-making process were regarded satisfactory to a large or very large extent by 41% of the NAs and 44% of the wider stakeholders.

As part of the NA's survey, participants were able to comment on their overall impression on which aspects have so far gone well or could be improved within the programme implementation. Out of the 49 respondents, 19 shared their view on the areas in which the programme implementation could improve or has worked well.

Regarding its strengths, four NAs viewed the programme's implementation as achieving its objectives. Two NAs highlighted that this is due to the increased level of funding, offering more opportunities for organisations and participants to benefit from the Erasmus+ programme.

Nevertheless, the majority of the NAs deemed three aspects in need of improvement: the poor IT systems, the administrative burden and the lack of promotion of youth projects.

- More than half (11 out of 19) of the NAs considered IT systems to be the primary aspect in need of improvement. NAs indicated a positive correlation between the poor IT tools and the administrative burden. Due to inefficient development and the timeframe of setting up the IT tools both the NAs and the wider stakeholders, faced administrative burdens. More specifically one NA identified the Beneficiary Module as particularly burdensome due to the poor IT system. This is because applicants encounter a high volume of bugs and delays in final reports.

¹¹¹ This issue was also brought up by different stakeholder interviews and is a prominent theme throughout the survey responses

¹¹² Mainly in terms of a large or very large extent.

¹¹³ For this answer, 24% of respondents found it not applicable.

- The complexity of some procedures was raised in relation to the administrative burden. According to eight NAs, administrative requirements in the application process need to be further simplified. Two examples were highlighted by the NAs:
 - The proposal template is problematic, as there are many similar questions.
 - Further guidance is needed for identifying suspicious and fraudulent cases.
- Four NAs commented specifically on the youth projects, saying that:
 - It has limited visibility and funding, which affects its effectiveness and reach.
 - The inability to involve other continents, especially Asia, Africa, and South America, hampers interaction and intercultural learning opportunities.
 - The restricted participation of Eastern Balkan countries undermines efforts to increase inclusion and promote active engagement.
 - Young individuals in new or small NGOs lack the resources to compete with larger organisations, putting them at risk of exclusion.

For this section, the two survey groups were asked to determine the extent to which external factors impacted the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme. The two figures below indicate three main external factors: post pandemic recovery of COVID-19, the Russian war against Ukraine and Brexit.

Figure 5: Impact of external factors - NAs

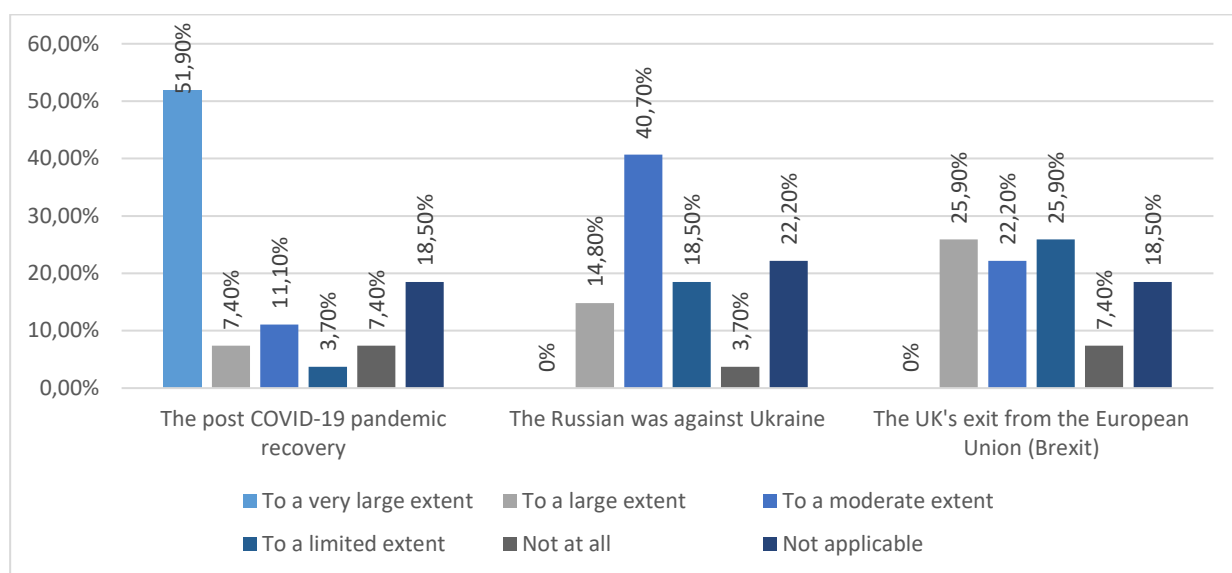
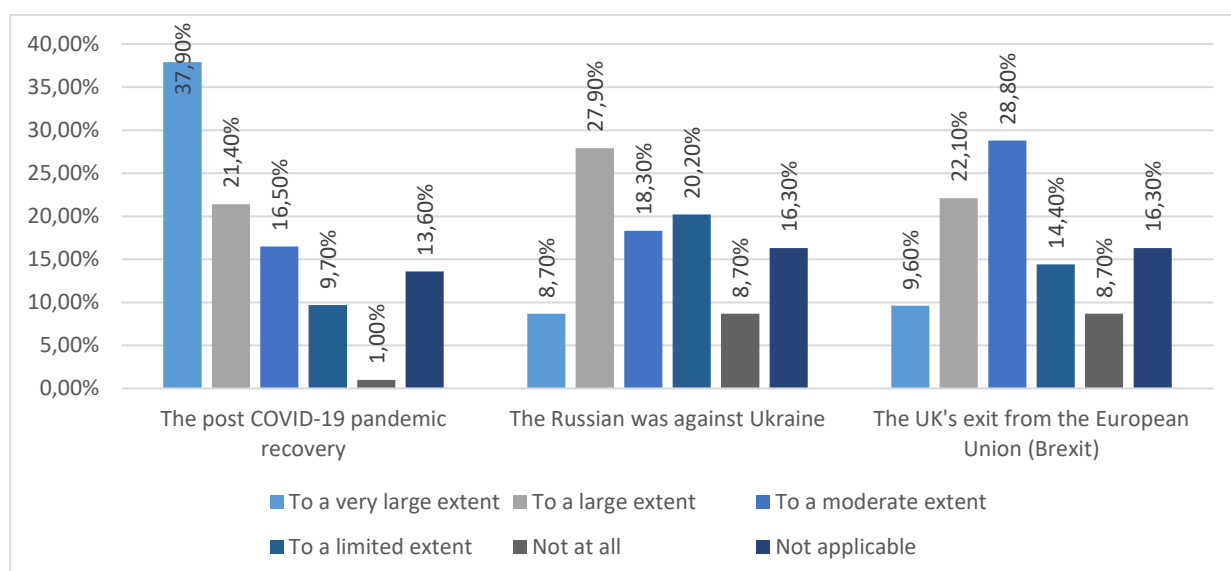


Figure 6: Impact of external factors – wider stakeholders

It can be seen that for both survey groups, the post COVID-19 pandemic recovery had the most impact on the Erasmus+ programme, with 59.3% in both groups answering it had affected the programme to a large or very large extent. This comes as no surprise, as the COVID-19 pandemic has heavily impacted education and training¹¹⁴. Other issues participants highlighted that have had a significant impact on the implementation of the programme are the current economic crisis (especially the rise of inflation) and concerns about the lack of environmentally friendly travel options.

When asked if the programme's implementation had been adjusted in light of these EU-wide challenges to suit their country's needs, 88% of the NAs and 75% of the wider stakeholders responded 'yes' to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although most NAs recognised that measures were put in place, some still experienced difficulties. One NA commented that they could not travel due to staff shortages because of COVID-19. Their project duration was denied an extension period, and they could not avail themselves of all their funding. Some NAs explained that travelling has not entirely picked up again and that the budget does not consider the rise in the cost of travel. Four wider stakeholders highlighted the loss of several youth organisations that did not recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Around 80% of NAs and 71% of the stakeholders confirmed that the programme's implementation was adjusted as a result of Russia's war against Ukraine. However, for both survey groups, there was a significant drop in positive responses regarding the adjustments of the programme to mitigate for the impact of Brexit, with only 56% of NAs and 52% of the wider stakeholders answering that the programme implementation was adjusted. The survey questions did not investigate further the lack of measures taken to adapt the programme to these two external factors.

Budget and resources

This section describes the results obtained on the budget and resources distributed under Erasmus+.

Survey participants were asked about the measures used by the European Commission (along with executive agencies and/or national agencies) to cope with the current economic situation and the rise

¹¹⁴[2022-erasmusplus-programme-guide.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

in inflation. While most NAs (56%) responded favourably, 73% of the wider stakeholders responded that they were not aware of any measures put in place to cope with the current economic situation and rising inflation.

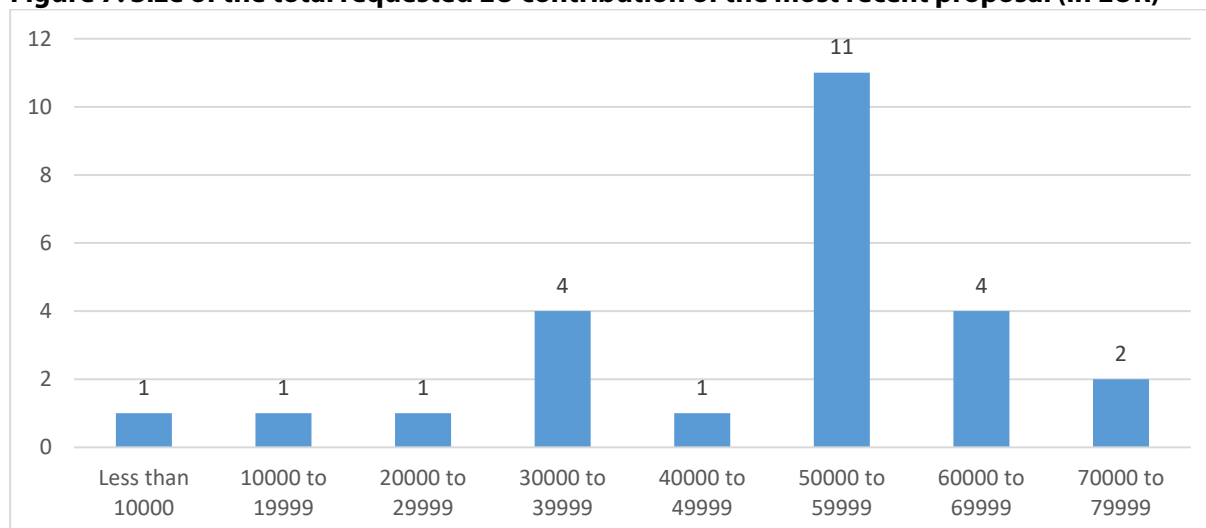
According to the NAs, the measures provided by these bodies were mainly related to the increasing unit costs for individual support and were mainly in response to rising inflation. Nevertheless, some NAs said that the continuous increase in prices meant that additional costs could not be covered, which could mean that some beneficiaries may no longer be able to implement all activities foreseen in their projects.

Most of the wider stakeholders who deemed the measures used by the European and national bodies as ineffective gave similar answers. Wider stakeholders highlighted the unit costs' limited scope, especially for travel expenses. Despite a notable surge in prices and the impact of unfavourable currency exchange rates, support for travel expenses has not been increased accordingly. They stated that there continues to be existing grant contracts without any modifications, and there seems to be a lack of flexibility regarding additional funding options. This fixed approach to unit costs hinders the ability to meet the actual cost of travel. Lump sum payments, designed as fixed sums, have also remained the same.

Indeed, 16% of the wider stakeholders, when asked directly about flexibility, responded that there is an overall inflexibility to the funding available. This relates mainly to administrative and unit costs. Nevertheless, most of the wider stakeholders (48%) argued the funding available was sufficiently flexible¹¹⁵ to allow for the project activities to be carried out. This was followed by 35% who believed the flexibility of the funds was at a moderate level. Flexibility has been identified on the lump sum system, as well as the general procedure of long-term projects.

Figure 7 shows the size of the total requested EU contribution of the most recent proposal. It can be seen that the majority of the beneficiaries reported the size of their budget to range between EUR 50,000 to EUR 59,999.

¹¹⁵ From very to a large extent

Figure 7: Size of the total requested EU contribution of the most recent proposal (in EUR)

When the two survey groups were asked about their satisfaction level on the budget distribution and the financial management at the programme level, both were generally pleased. This accounted for 60% of the NAs and 61% of the wider stakeholders who were very to somewhat satisfied. In contrast, only 17% of the NAs and 15% of the wider stakeholders were very to somewhat dissatisfied. Regardless of the high level of satisfaction by the NAs, two Key Actions were mainly considered in need of receiving a higher budget: KA1 (Learning Mobility) and KA2 (Cooperation among organisations and institutions). This was especially highlighted in the areas related to higher education, training and youth. On the other hand, one NA suggested increasing flexibility in reallocating between different budget categories instead of focusing on expanding the budget solely on one particular sector.

Most of the NAs (60%) do not believe there are current programme actions that do not require any additional budget or are even overfunded. In contrast, 40% deemed specific actions had sufficient budget. Specifically, the responses indicate that mobility actions and transnational cooperation activities do not require additional budget. However, there is no complete consensus on the budget allocation among NAs. For instance, one NA commented that partnerships need to receive more funding, saying that this could be achieved by reorganising the financing and taking some of the funding for the mobility actions.

Regarding the contracting procedures and tools from the wider stakeholders' perspective, 47% fully to partly agreed that they were user-friendly. This was followed by 35% who fully and partly disagreed. Indeed, those who disagreed on this issue, highlighted that they experienced technical problems with the IT tools, thus creating an administrative burden and making the contracting procedure lengthy. Nevertheless, 61% of the wider stakeholders fully to partly agreed that the contracting procedures were managed in a timely manner, while 50% argued that the administrative and legal requirements were proportionate to the time needed for complying.

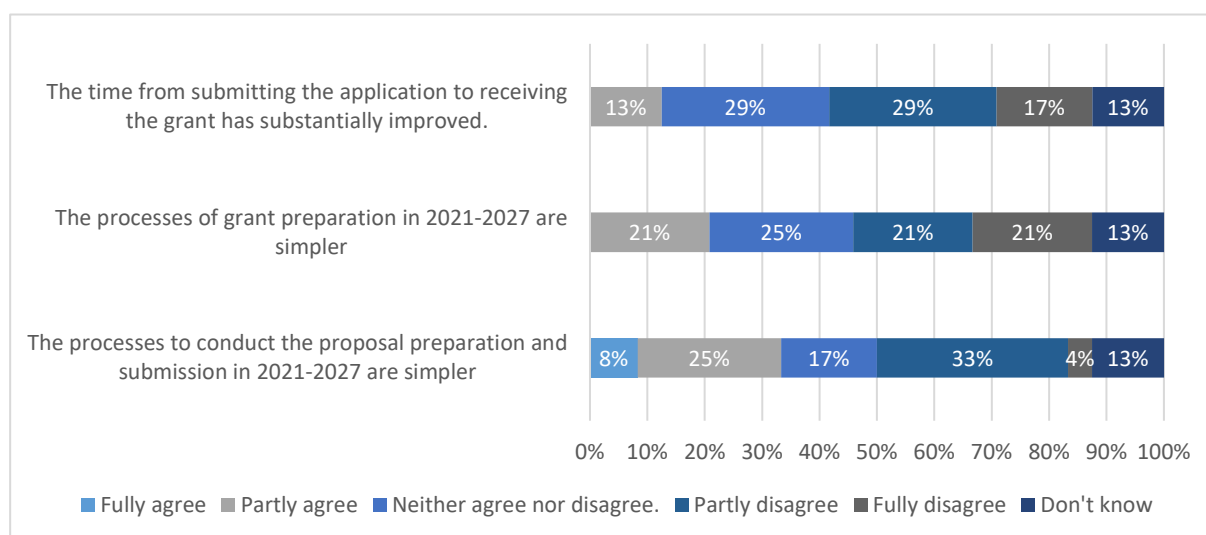
Overall, wider stakeholders' perspective on the funding schemes is positive. In terms of the clarity of the schemes funded, only a minority of them disagreed (10%), as 69% deemed them to be fully to partly coherent. In addition, 68% fully or partly agreed that the funding schemes were adequate for the needs of their project. Similar results can be observed on the potential for achieving the expected project results, as 69% fully to partly agreed that the size of the funding received was adequate, while 82% considered that the duration of the project to be sufficient. However, the minority who had a negative perspective of the funding schemes indicated that:

- There was late confirmation of the project acceptance and of the funding contract. This can create a variety of problems in the project implementation as well as the financial planning..
- The funding for youth projects was small compared to other areas, which is specially concerning as many youth organisations are on survival mode after the COVID-19 pandemic.

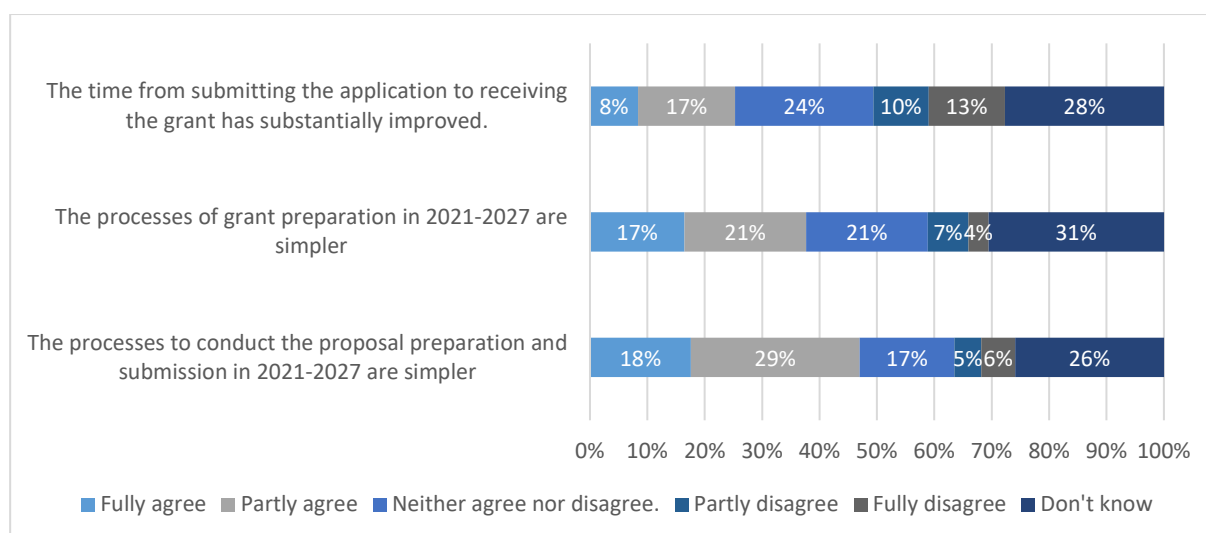
Regarding the contractual flexibility in project management, 58% of the wider stakeholders considered the adaptation of the project objectives to be sufficiently flexible when there were changed circumstances¹¹⁶. Stakeholders receiving funds (48%) additionally agreed that changes in the project consortium were sufficiently flexible.

Both survey groups were additionally asked to determine to what extent they considered the 2021-2027 processes to be simpler (in terms of proposal and grant preparation) and timely (in terms of grant) compared to the previous 2014-2020 programmes, as shown in Figures 8 and 9.

Figure 8: Comparison between 2021-2027 and 2014-2020 programme – NAs



¹¹⁶ This percentage includes those who fully to partly agree.

Figure 9: Comparison between 2021-2027 and 2014-2020 programme – wider stakeholders

As shown in the figures above, the NAs and the wider stakeholders seem to have opposite opinions on the success of the 2021-2027 to the 2014-2020 programme. The results of the survey do not reveal the reason behind this polarisation. However, a possible explanation is that the simplifications may have been more effective in easing the processes for applicants than for NAs.

The majority of the NAs considered the 2014-2020 simpler and timelier in comparison to the 2021-2027 programme. In particular, 37% of the NAs viewed the proposal preparation and submission to be simpler during the 2014-2020 programme. By contrast, 45% of the wider stakeholders considered the current programme simpler. In terms of the time from submitting the application to receiving the grant, 46% of the NAs deemed the 2021-2027 to have worsened in comparison to the 2014-2020 programme. The wider stakeholders had a slightly better perspective, as 38% viewed the 2021-2027 grant preparation timelier. Nevertheless, this was followed by 31% of the stakeholders receiving a fund who had no opinion on the timeframe of a grant preparation, while 29% of the NAs neither agreed nor disagreed. However, the two survey groups similarly agreed on the simplicity of grant preparation. Around 42% of the NAs and 41% of the wider stakeholder group considered the grant preparation simpler during the 2014-2020 programme.

As a concluding remark, the wider stakeholder group shared some suggestions to improve the administrative and financial programme requirements in order to reduce the costs during the project implementation. Most of them had suggestions on the following areas:

- Reduction (or simplification) of the requirements needed in reporting both in financial and administrative information.
- Simplifying and fixing the existing IT tool issues to reduce the administrative burden and delays.
- Creating a manual or guidance with best practices:
 - to clarify the requirements needed within the finance reporting; and
 - to identify and prevent projects from facing risks and/or failing.
- Avoiding high travel costs by meeting the deadlines of announcements and providing contracts on time. This would allow stakeholders to book travel and accommodation tickets in advance.

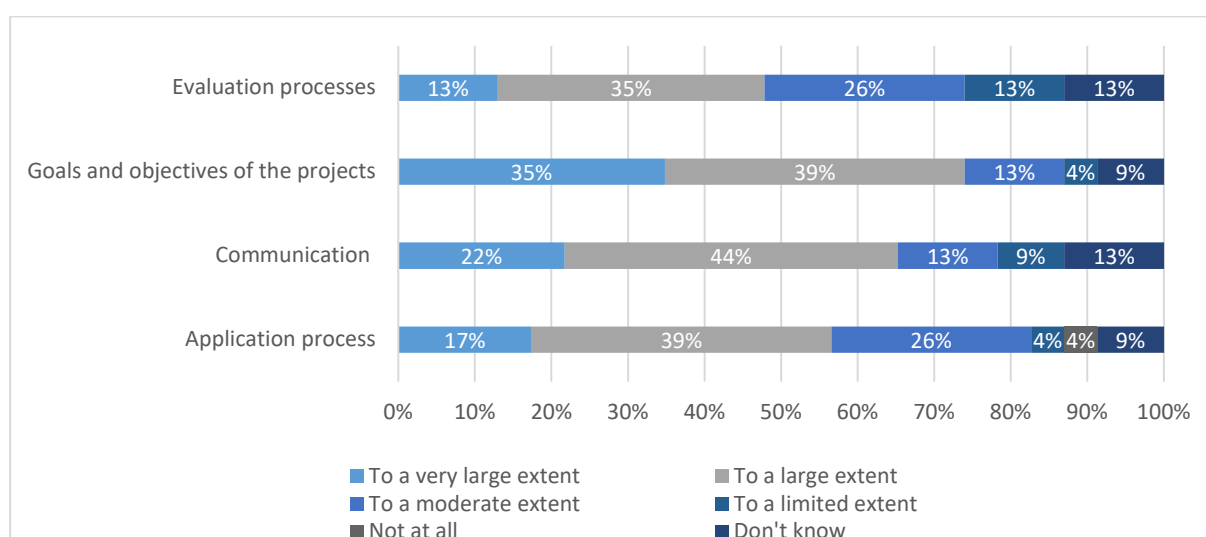
- Providing a lump sum grant. In this way, the applicant knows how high the grant will be in case the application is successful. The lump sum construction and financial reporting modalities could reduce the administrative burden and thus the staffing costs.

EU priorities

This section describes the results obtained for evaluating the presence of EU priorities (the Green Deal, Digital Transformation, Gender Equality) within Erasmus+.

At a general level, NAs were asked to consider the extent to which the priorities of the Green Deal, Digital Transformation and Gender Equality were present within different aspects of the Erasmus+ programme. As seen in Figure 10, these priorities were generally included to a large extent. The majority of the NAs (56%) believed the priorities were taken into consideration within the application process of the Erasmus+ programme. According to 66% of the NAs, the priorities were highly communicated within the programme. Furthermore, 74% of the NAs agreed that the priorities were included within the goals and objectives of the programme. Lastly, according to 48% of the NAs, the priorities of the Green Deal, Digital Transformation and Gender Equality were considered present to a large extent during the evaluation of proposals within Erasmus+ programme.

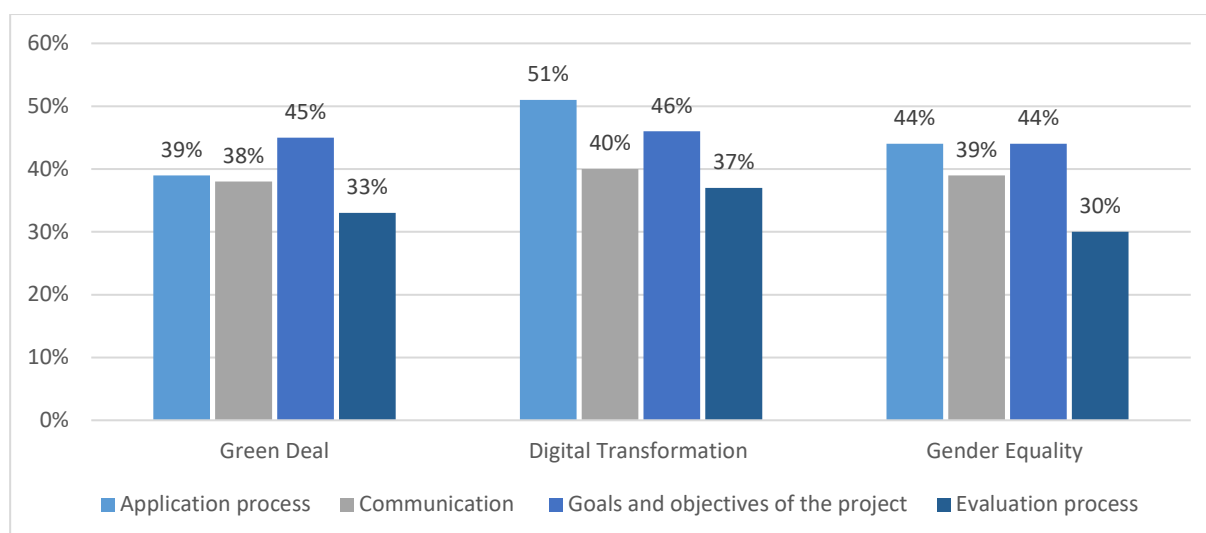
Figure 10: EU priorities within Erasmus+ - NAs¹¹⁷



However, wider stakeholders do not have such an optimistic view, as less than half of the respondents considered the priorities of the Green Deal, Digital Transformation and Gender Equality were overall present in the programme.

Wider stakeholders' questions regarding the priorities differed from those asked to NAs, as they were asked about the integration of each one of the priorities into the programme rather than in a general manner. This is shown in Figure 11.

¹¹⁷ With regards to EU priorities, national agencies and wider stakeholders were asked a different question. Wider stakeholder were asked to evaluate the integration of each priority into the programme, while NAs were asked about general integration.

Figure 11: EU priorities within Erasmus+ – wider stakeholders

Digital Transformation appears to be the priority that is most included. Wider stakeholders agreed that Digital Transformation (51%) and Gender Equality (44%) were highly taken into consideration within the application process of the Erasmus+ programme. Similarly, the priorities of the Digital Transformation (40%) were highly communicated within the Erasmus+ programme. Furthermore, 46% of the wider stakeholder group agreed that the priorities were included within the goals and objectives of the programme. Stakeholders say that the evaluation process of the Erasmus+ programme includes the priorities of Green Deal, Digital Transformation and Gender Equality to a lesser extent than the other categories.

As part of this section, the NAs were asked to describe how the EU priorities could be more concretely integrated within the Erasmus+ programme. The following points were identified by the survey respondents:

- EU priorities must increase in the available budget to achieve consistency in relevant EU policies. This is particularly relevant for the higher education sector.
- The priorities remain ambitious in the proposals but further work is required to implement them during project delivery. Proposal writers may address these priorities since they are within the requirements, but these aspects are not addressed in the final report.
- More awareness/campaigns and dissemination of good practices on such measures should be promoted both at EU level and at national level.
- European targets should be set and linked to appropriate impact indicators to which countries can orientate themselves. In addition, stronger incentives should be put in place.

Furthermore, some wider stakeholders recommended how to better integrate the objectives of the Green Deal within the programme. The recommendations included implementing stricter rules for green and sustainable travel.

It is worth noting that four stakeholders expressed concerns about "forcing" the priorities, saying that it can shift focus away from the programme's core objectives.

Effectiveness & added value

This section describes the results obtained on the effectiveness and added value of Erasmus+.

Around 70% of the NAs argued that their country's projects were on track to deliver their objectives, while only 8.3% considered this not to be the case. Three elements were deemed to be particularly successful within the NAs' countries:

- The Erasmus+ accreditation, which offers simplified access to KA1 funding.
- KA210 (on small-scale partnerships in youth) and KA1 projects being in line with their expectations.
- Effective inclusion.

Apart from the heavy administrative burdens and the ineffective IT tools, which were identified in the early implementation section of this annex, the NAs highlighted some shortcomings within the Erasmus+ programme:

- The youth element of the programme is too complicated.
- The lack of inclusion of the Green Deal objectives, especially regarding mobility projects.
- The approach to outlining general objectives in the programme guide leads to fewer innovative solutions as applicants tend to address the requests of the Commission and NAs.
- Insufficient budget available in accreditation, especially related to the school sector. Projects reaching the quality benchmark are considered high for the limited available KA2 budget.
- The lack of collaboration among countries.

The wider stakeholder group were asked to explain to what extent the individual or organisation benefited from participating in Erasmus+. A significant majority of the survey participants (60%) expressed strong agreement regarding the enhancement of citizen engagement and participation in the democratic activities of the Union. It also facilitated the interactions between citizens from diverse Member States. The wider stakeholders had a positive outlook (65%) on inclusion and diversity in regards to participation in the Erasmus+.

More than 70% of the wider stakeholders strongly agreed that the programme promoted young people's participation in democratic processes and civic engagement. According to 60% of the wider stakeholders, the Erasmus+ programmes ensured an increase in the strength and resilience of communities. Only a small group of participants (8%) had a negative perspective on this regard.

In terms of the programme's contribution to the digital transformation, especially strengthening digital skills, as well as raising awareness of the risks and opportunities of digital technology, wider stakeholders (39%) had a moderate outlook. However, 38% of the wider stakeholder group agreed to a large and a very large extent on the inclusion of the priorities of digital transformation.

For promoting a democratic society, more specifically, by improving the collective memory of defining moments in modern European history (i.e. the coming to power of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes), the stakeholders had a negative outlook. In total, 49% of the wider stakeholder group responded with not at all or to a limited extent, while only 19% had a positive perspective. By contrast, 45% of the participants agreed that the Erasmus+ programme promoted citizens' and representative associations' participation in and contribution to the democratic and civic life of the Union to a large or very large extent.

Concerning the quality of education, training, and youth systems in Europe, as well as transnational learning and cooperation, around 70% of the wider participants had a positive outlook. A small fraction (10%) deemed the quality of education, training and youth systems to have improved to a limited extent. The majority of the wider stakeholders (53%) agreed that Erasmus+ increased the participation in policy debates, research and teaching, as well as the development and implementation of joint activities. For the promotion of sports and physical activity, 42% of the wider stakeholders believed that the Erasmus+ was not at all or to a limited extent successful. Particularly notable was its effectiveness in terms of recognising and executing innovative initiatives within the sports sector, as well as efficiently organising not-for-profit events geared towards fostering greater involvement in sports activities.

Almost 70% of the funded stakeholders agreed that the Erasmus+ programme increased learning mobility of individuals and groups. Correspondingly, 77% agreed to a large or to a very large extent that the Erasmus+ programme increased non-formal and informal learning mobility, as well as active participation among young people. However, when it came to the increase of mobility for sports staff, 52% argued that this was achieved to a small extent.

Due to the programme's overall effectiveness, 76% of the wider stakeholders agreed that their project was on track to deliver their objectives, with 65% additionally confirming that they faced no shortcomings when compared to other EU funding programmes. The remaining 35% reported the following shortcomings:

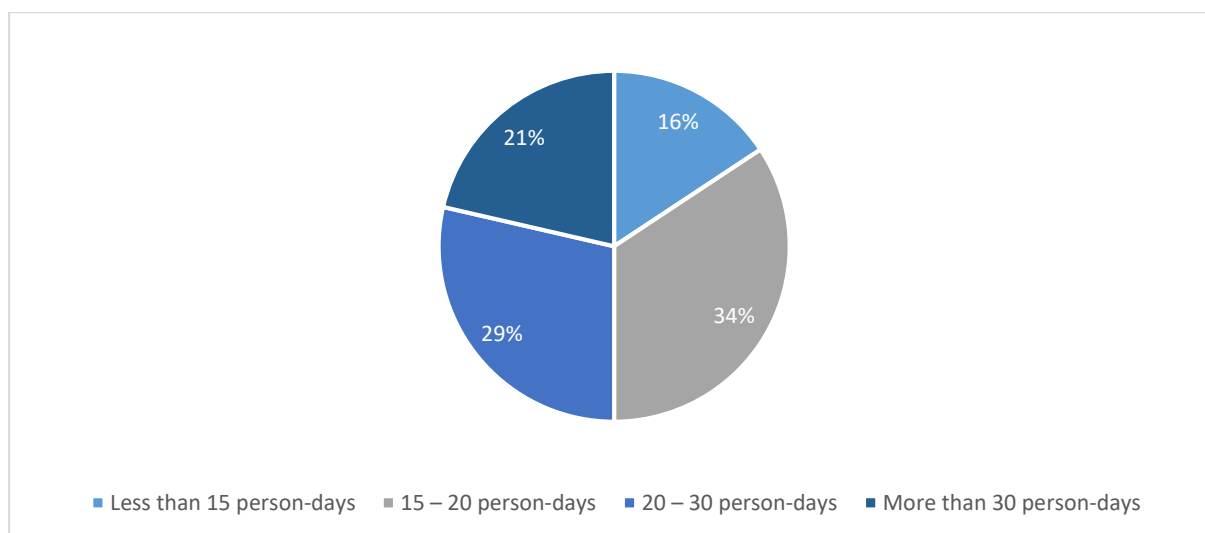
- A lack of support for management costs that makes it challenging for organisations to run projects effectively.
- Limited possibilities for undertaking global projects due to financial constraints or other barriers.
- Need for more funding for organisations to carry out their projects effectively.
- limited funding for some NAs, which then resort to micromanagement practices that lead to introducing “non-existent” rules, making the process more complex and less flexible.
- Possible disparities in funding allocation among countries, leading to unfairness and inequity.
- Imbalance in funding between youth-focused programs and other initiatives like those for businesses or international aid, despite the significance of youth work in societal development.
- Different evaluation criteria of NAs, which can lead to organisational inconsistency and confusion.
- Excessively burdensome and time-consuming administrative processes that are not proportional to the project size with redundant information sometimes needing to be repeated.
- Budget constraints for central calls, leading to varying success rates between countries.
- Restrictions on travel budgets, which could limit the scope of certain projects.
- The announced simplification process not effectively addressing the administrative burden that beneficiaries face.

Application process

This section mainly focuses on the wider stakeholder outlook of the application process of the Erasmus+ programme.

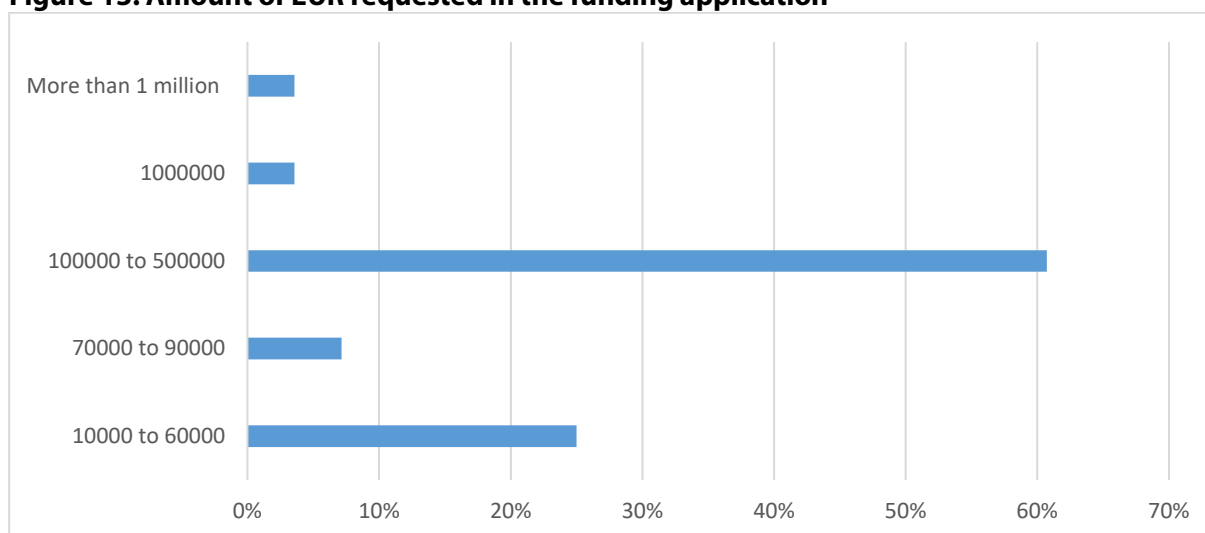
Figure 12 shows the wider stakeholders' estimation for the effort a proposal requires from an applicant. Some 34% argue that it takes 15 to 20 person-days for a proposal to be produced.

Figure 12: Effort a proposal requires from an applicant organisation in terms of person-days.



From the proposals produced, the amount requested in the funding application for the whole project ranged mainly between EUR 100,000 and EUR 500,000, as shown Figure 13.

Figure 13: Amount of EUR requested in the funding application



Overall, the majority of the participants who were categorised as individuals or representing a small-scale organisation of less than 20 people required some support to apply for the programme. This accounted for 45% of the participants, while around 35% who found this question not applicable to their case. The remaining 20% applied independently without the support of others.

Around 41% of survey participants agreed that the efforts needed for a proposal submission were proportional to a large and a very large extent based on the volume of the funding required. This was followed by 30% of the participants who considered the effort to be at a moderate level. Additionally, 48% of the wider stakeholders deemed the efforts needed from them were proportionate to the complexity of the proposed project. When taking into account the efforts needed for the proposal based on the number of partners involved, 51% of stakeholders considered the efforts to be proportionate, while 10% considered them not proportionate.

Similarly, half the participants perceive their efforts to be proportionate to the strategic relevance or interest in the topic or research of the proposal. Around 32% of the wider stakeholders agreed to a

large extent that their efforts were not in proportion to the low chances of funding. In comparison, 29% believed that it was not proportional.

Survey participants were asked about the two-stage proposal process and its efficiency. Most of the wider stakeholders had no opinion on the matter as they were not aware of this proposal process. Of the remaining participants who had experience of this type of proposal, 18% approved of its efficiency level, 17% deemed the two-stage process to be efficient at a moderate level, while 14% overall disagreed on its efficiency.

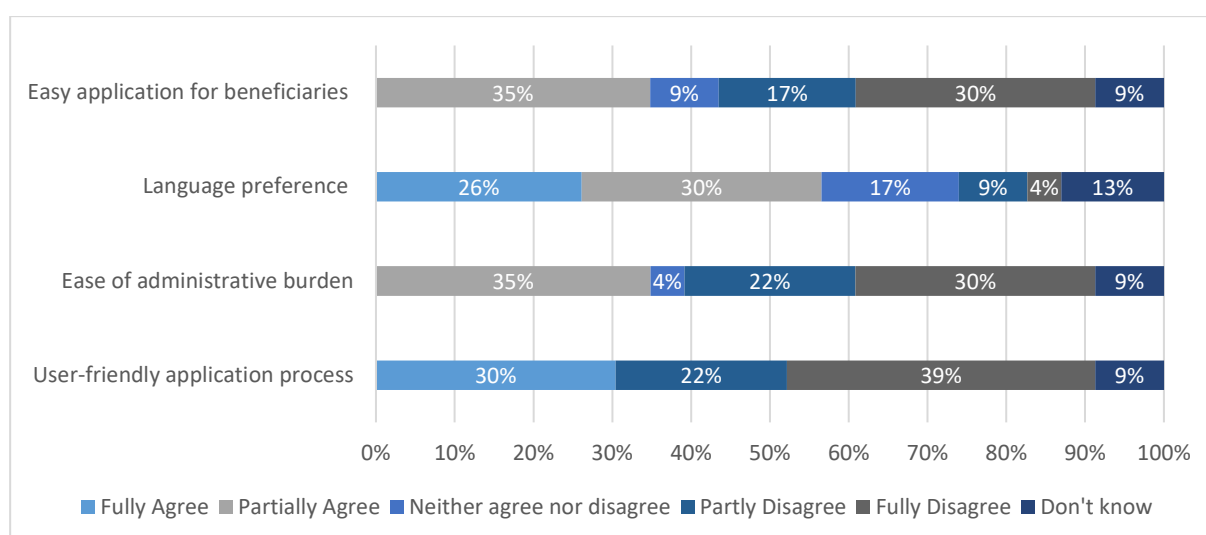
In order to reduce the costs of the project application preparation, wider stakeholders suggested that the procedure should be simpler overall. More specifically, the wider stakeholders recommended that there should be more support for the applicants in the different stages of the proposal. This could be done by providing clear guidelines, having a more active helpdesk and organising training sessions. Additionally, they recommended tailoring applications based on the opportunities and the sectors involved. This could create less confusion for the applicant and help them produce a good quality proposal.

Digitalisation and IT tools

This section describes the results obtained in relation to the digitalisation and IT tools used by applicants of Erasmus+.

Figures 14 and 15 summarise the effectiveness of IT tools in the application of an Erasmus+ programme based on the two survey groups.

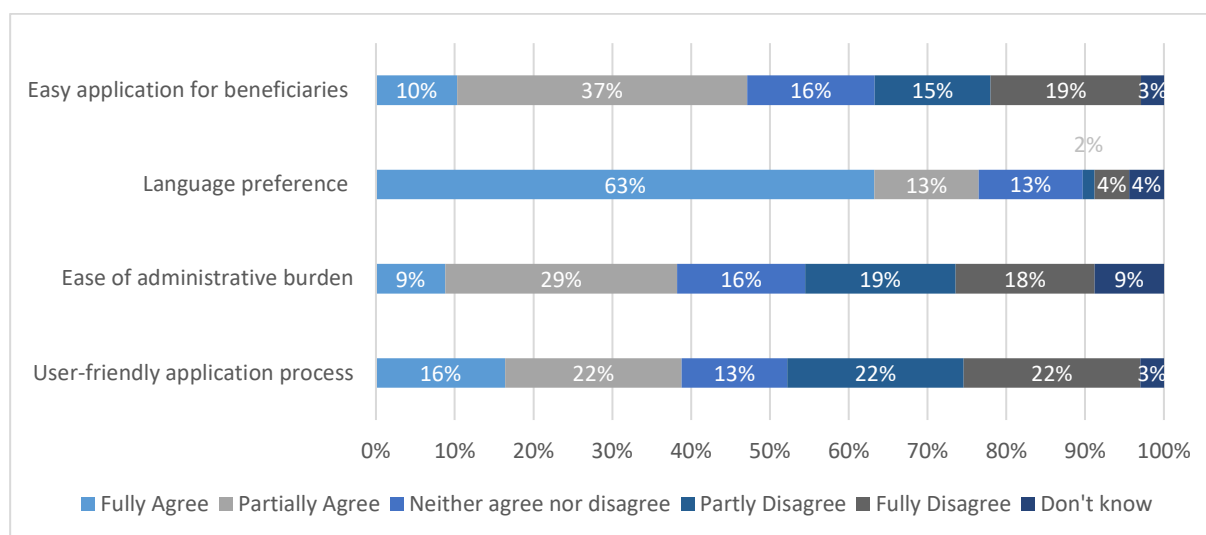
Figure 14: IT tools effectiveness – NAs



As shown in the graph above, IT tools seem to be overall faulty. By taking into account those who partially and fully disagree, around 61% of the NAs considered the IT tools used for the application process of the programme not to be user-friendly. Wider stakeholders share the same opinion with 44% saying that the IT tools are inconvenient. Similarly, 47% of the NAs reported that the IT tools complicate the stakeholders' application process. The wider stakeholders, however, consider the application process to be overall a positive experience. Only 34% of the wider stakeholders viewed the application of IT tools as difficult. Some NAs recommended simplifying the IT tools and improved

preparation before the start of the programming period, including the conducting of appropriate tests and the provision of guidance to users.

Figure 15: IT tools effectiveness - wider stakeholders.



As previously identified in the early implementation section of the report, the poor IT tools had an impact on the administrative burden for the participants. This section confirms this statement: 52% of the NAs deemed the IT tools to have prevented stakeholders from facing low administrative burden, while 35% of the NAs and 38% of wider stakeholders agreed that the IT tools were effective in easing the burden for administrative projects. Both survey groups strongly agree that the digitisation of the application process has allowed wider stakeholders to choose their preferred language when using the platform; 63% of the wider stakeholder group and 56% of the NAs fully to partially agreed on the language availability.

NAs and the wider stakeholder group were consulted about the user-friendliness of the reporting platforms. This is shown in Figures 16 and 17.

Figure 16: The digitisation of reporting - NAs

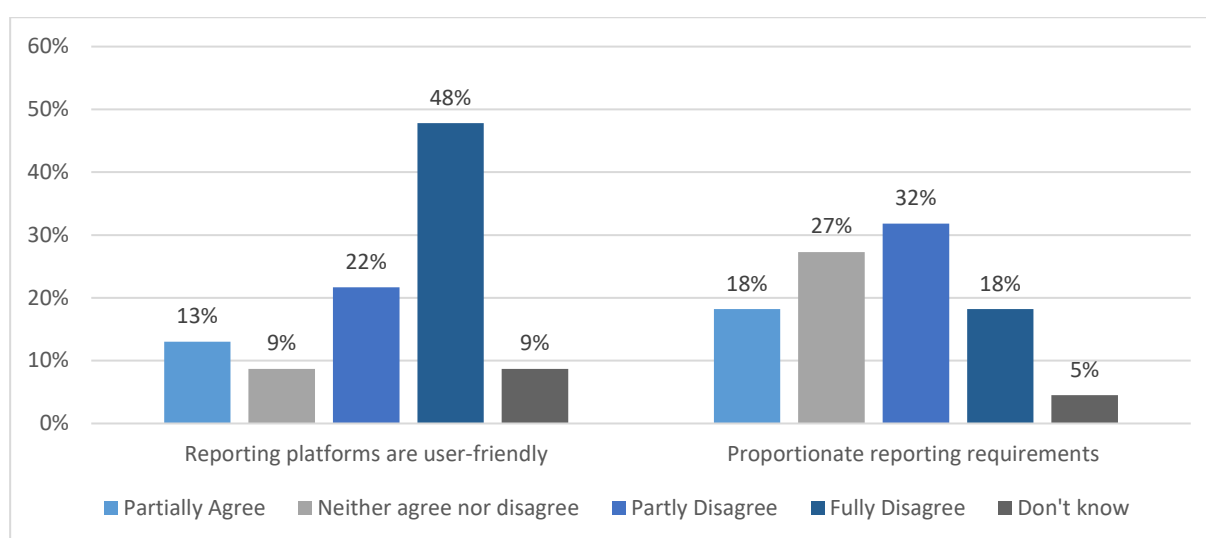
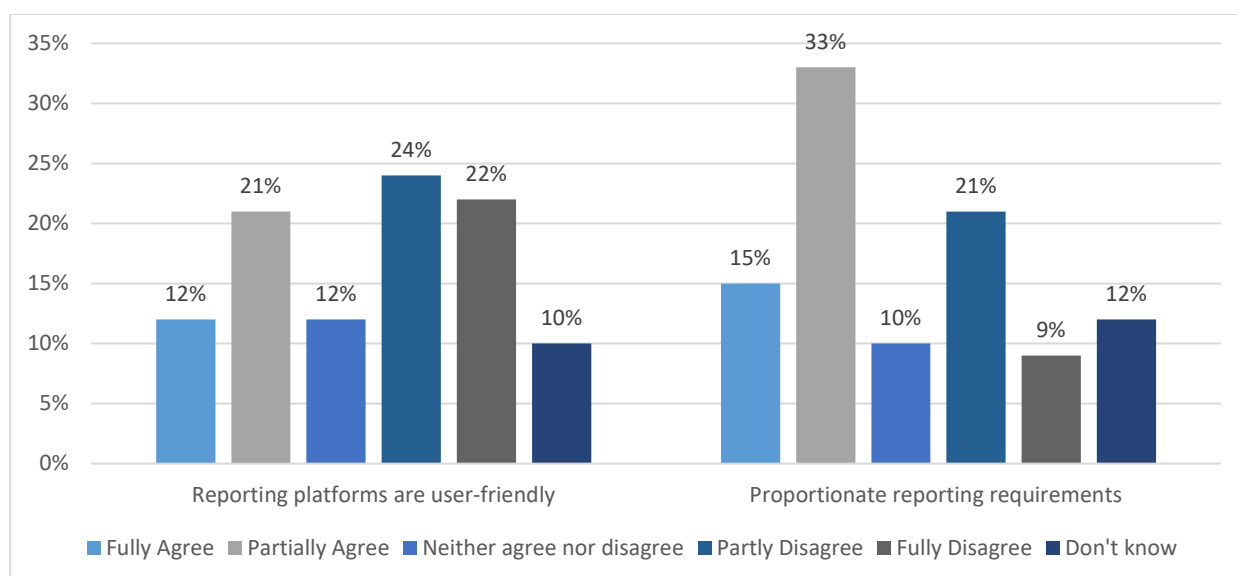


Figure 17: The digitisation of reporting - wider stakeholders

Some 70%¹¹⁸ of NAs and 46% of wider stakeholders argued that the reporting platforms were not user-friendly. Only 13% of NAs viewed the reporting platforms to be user-friendly, while 33% of the stakeholders had a positive user experience with the reporting platforms. Similarly, when observing the figures above, the majority of the NAs (60%) viewed the reporting requirements for project management and/or monitoring as disproportionate.

Some NAs claimed that many beneficiaries cannot work in an Excel document when implementing the budget proposal. This is because errors are often experienced by the applicants, especially when working with an Apple Mac computer, which is not specifically designed to use Microsoft applications. Additionally, NAs identified another obstacle regarding the reporting system. This mostly relates to the automatically generated financial statement where the flat rate of the work package completion or changes in the figures of the spent grant for each participant cannot be adjusted. By contrast, 48% of the wider stakeholder group viewed the reporting requirements for project management and/or monitoring as proportionate.

Regardless of the wider stakeholders' positive outlook on the IT tools, a number commented on their faultiness. In particular, the wider stakeholders agreed with the NAs, who argued that the IT tools (i.e. Beneficiary Module) lag and face high system errors. This causes duplication of work and an increase in administrative burden for the applicant. Both clarity on how the IT tools can be used efficiently and a system update are needed in order to reduce the inconvenience and administrative burden faced.

As part of the wider stakeholder survey questionnaire, the participants were asked to share their opinion on the four IT tools available. These are the Online language support (OLS), Quality Support (QS) and the Beneficiary Module (BM), and the Project Management Module (PMM).

Concerning the OLS tool, the majority of the stakeholders (55%) had no knowledge of whether the tool improves their knowledge of the language. For those who responded, 21% were overall dissatisfied with the effectiveness of this IT tool, while 19% fully or partly agreed that the tool is effective. A similar conclusion can also be made on the interactivity and design of the OLS courses offered. While 72% did not have an opinion on the matter, 14% were overall dissatisfied of the quality of the course. When

¹¹⁸ This includes both those who have responded partly and fully disagree

consulted if there are there any improvements that could be made regarding any of these tools, respondents said the following:

- Young people do not use the courses offered by the tool as they are not practical.
- Volunteers preferred to use free apps (e.g. Duolingo) or attend in-person classes instead.
- The tool was unpopular among participants who were interested in learning languages that had complex grammatical rules (in this particular case, they were referring to Czech).

On the Quality Label application process, the wider stakeholder group seemed to have more of a positive opinion, as 17% fully and partly agreed that the application process was clear and straightforward. Only 8% of the participants seemed to disagree with this point, while a majority of 65% were not aware of the quality of the QLs application process. Excluding the 71% of the participants who did not know about the effectiveness of the QL in connecting organisation with volunteers, 14% positively agreed.

Furthermore, 34% of the wider stakeholder group deemed the BM tool to be effectively supporting the monitoring of a project's progress and budget, while 14% of the participants believed that the tool was partly or fully ineffective. Some 28% of the stakeholders found the tool to be inconvenient, while 25% considered the tool to be user-friendly. The participants who had a negative experience with the BM highlighted that the tool creates a lot of delays due to bugs, and there is a lack of fluidity and clarity. Some participants suggested that a possible solution to repair these issues would be to create interactive messages that appear when a data entry error occurs. The message could help the user identify what the error is and how to solve it or to request help. In this way users would not need to contact the NAs whenever there is a problem.

Regarding the PMM tool, excluding 59% of participants who did not know the tool, 20% of the wider stakeholder group considered it effective, and 18% agreed it was user-friendly. By contrast, only 12% found the tool inconvenient, and 8% found it ineffective as a project management tool.

Conclusions

Early implementation of the Erasmus+ programme

Overall, survey participants were satisfied with the programme's early implementation stage. Stakeholders deemed the Commission's and NA's communication activities as effective. The programme's announcements and calls, as well as the aims and objectives of these calls and administrative requirements, were clear according to the surveyed wider stakeholders.

In terms of the evaluation process, respondents confirmed that the quality of information, its fairness, and the transparency of the funding decisions were overall satisfactory. Nevertheless, participants heavily criticised the user experience offered by the programme. In particular, wider stakeholders had a negative experience with the proposal template due to IT problems and the administrative burden.

The majority of the surveyed wider stakeholders identified COVID-19 as the main external factor which negatively impacted the implementation of the programme. The measures used by European and national bodies to adjust the programme's implementation in response to the pandemic and the Russian War against Ukraine were effective.

Budget and resources

In terms of the funding and resources offered in the programme, most of the participants shared a positive outlook. Survey participants were overall pleased with the budget distribution and the financial management at the programme level. Wider stakeholders were satisfied by the funding schemes, as they were clear and adequate for the needs of their project.

EU priorities

Both survey groups deemed the EU priorities (the Green Deal, digital transformation, gender equality) to be present within the different aspects of the Erasmus+ programme. According to the wider stakeholder group, efforts towards integrating the digital transformation's objectives are more present within the programme than efforts towards including the Green Deal and gender equality.

Effectiveness & added value

The effectiveness and added value of the Erasmus+ programme had an overall positive appraisal. NAs confirmed that their country's projects were on track to deliver their objectives on time. The wider stakeholder group agreed that their participation increased citizens' engagement, as well as promoted inclusion and diversity. The programme's contribution to the digital transformation, as well as the quality of education, training and youth systems also have positive results.

Application process

The application process was satisfactory according to the wider stakeholder group. Participants agreed that the efforts needed for a proposal submission were proportional to the volume of the funding required. Participants who had experience of the two-stage proposal process and its efficiency were generally satisfied. Nevertheless, the wider stakeholder group agreed that in order to reduce the costs of the project application preparation, a simpler procedure should be made by receiving more support within the different application stages.

From the wider stakeholder group perspective, the contracting procedure and tools were generally user-friendly and were managed in a timely manner. However, technical issues due to the IT tools have been a barrier. The two survey groups had different opinions on the measures used by the Commission and NAs to tackle the costs faced from inflationary pressures. While NAs considered the measures used

as effective, the wider stakeholder group believed there was a lack of support, especially for travel and accommodation costs.

The majority of the NAs considered the 2014-2020 simpler and timelier in comparison to the 2021-2027 programme. This contradicted the point of view of the wider stakeholder group. Regardless, the two survey groups agreed that the 2014-2020 grant preparation was simpler than the current one.

Digitalisation and IT tools

The user experience of the different IT tools was heavily criticised by the survey participants. According to the wider stakeholder group, QS and PMM were more effective in comparison to the OLS and the BM. Nevertheless, stakeholders highlighted that the IT tools were overall faulty, leading to high administrative burden for the participants and creating a negative user experience during the application process. Similarly, the user experience for reporting platforms were described as inconvenient by the wider stakeholders. As a result, the reporting requirements for project management and/or monitoring were considered as disproportionate.

ANNEX 3: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

A small number of semi-structured interviews were carried out as part of this study. The interviews were designed to support the development and validation of recommendations. Stakeholders consulted have been anonymised. The type of stakeholder group is indicated in the left-hand column.

Table 6: Anonymised list of stakeholders interviewed

Stakeholder type	Date of interview
Umbrella civil society organisation	4 July 2023
Umbrella civil society organisation	4 July 2023
Civil Society organisation	13 July 2023

This study provides an overview of the implementation to date of the 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme. It analyses the early programme implementation and provides a description of barriers identified. The main finding is that the programme implementation is progressing well overall, although improvements can be made to the 'Youth' part of the funding programme. Administrative shortcomings could also be addressed. The study concludes with a set of recommendations.
