

Research for CULT Committee –

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



The European Solidarity Corps (ESC) programme aims to bring together young people to build a more inclusive society, supporting vulnerable people and responding to societal and humanitarian challenges. The main target group of the ESC programme is young people aged 18-30, or, in the case of humanitarian activities, up to 35 years of age.

The European Solidarity Corps is divided into two strands – solidarity strand and humanitarian aid strand. The solidarity strand of the programme supports volunteering, solidarity projects, networking activities, and quality and support measures. Humanitarian aid projects can involve individuals volunteering for two to 12 months.

In order to ensure that the organisations participating in the ESC are of the highest standard, a Quality Label has been introduced. The Quality Label affirms that an organisation is legitimate and is able and willing to carry out high-quality, solidarity activities that are in line with the principles, objectives and quality standards of the ESC.

The present document is the executive summary of the study on EU funding programmes 2021-2027 in culture, media, education, youth and sports: first lessons, challenges and future perspectives: European Solidarity Corps. The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: <http://bit.ly/3Eq7Nkv>

The policy aspects of implementation are the responsibility of the Commission's Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC). The practical aspects of implementation are handled by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). However, a large part of this activity is devolved to national agencies.

This study concludes that overall the implementation of the programme is achieving its objectives, and that the content of the programme is of high value, particularly the solidarity aspect. While a communication strategy has been developed, there is a need to increase further the awareness-raising and 'brand-building' activities at European and national levels. This is to ensure the buy-in of public authorities, civil societies, organisations, and participants, particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Regarding the solidarity aspect, several national agencies stressed that the programme's budget was insufficient since it did not allow new organisations and individuals to effectively participate in the programme.

Since the ESC was separated from the Erasmus+ programme, stakeholders have the impression that there has been an increase in administrative requirements. This has resulted in greater administrative burden for national agencies and organisations involved in ESC projects. Additionally, stakeholders have reported issues with the IT tools, including frequent system errors.

Another challenge is related to the budget. Some organisations cannot afford to work with volunteers and have had to give up on some projects due to the low budget coupled with inflation and the cost-of-living crisis. Stakeholders have suggested that the budget should increase annually to accommodate new organisations that wish to implement projects each year.

Based on the findings of the research, the following recommendations are made:

Recommendation 1: Increase the visibility and brand of the programme. The European Commission as well as national agencies should prioritise communication and awareness-raising efforts for the ESC programme, as it is currently not widely known to the public. To ensure effective campaigns, the EC and NAs should collaborate with the ESC projects to raise awareness by promoting success stories and testimonials. This should be accompanied by a high-level campaign to increase the programme's visibility within European and national structures. Good practices should be promoted at the European and national level. Establishing a common branding strategy would facilitate the recognisability. Strengthening the prestige of the Quality Label would not only increase the visibility of the ESC but also contribute to its greater credibility.

However, if the communication activities are successful and more organisations end up applying, it would result in an even lower success rate for projects within the current limited budget leaving many organisations and young people discouraged. For this reason, increase of communication, promotional and awareness-raising activities needs to be accompanied with an increase in the budget of the ESC in order to be able to offer opportunities to potential new applicants. (see also Recommendation 2 below)

Recommendation 2: Ensure a sufficient budget as a prerequisite for guaranteeing that the programme is accessible to persons from all socioeconomic backgrounds. As emphasised by the stakeholder consultation, the ESC requires a continuous increase of its budget. Furthermore, the flat rate and lump sum features need to reflect the latest developments in the economy of the EU-27, including rising inflation. This ensures that the participants are able to cover their basic expenses and decent living standards, while preventing the participation within the programme becoming exclusive to persons from more well-off backgrounds. The budget ceiling for the individual projects, in terms of administrative and resource costs, should be increased.

Recommendation 3: Reduce the administrative burden to adjust to the programme target groups. The processes should be continuously improved in order to reduce the administrative burden for applicants and beneficiaries. The administrative processes should be better tailored to the target groups of the programme, for whom the ESC is likely their first encounter with an EU-funded programme. Additional support (for example, in the form of training and video tutorials) should be provided to organisations, particularly those that focus on providing opportunities for participants from vulnerable backgrounds (see also Recommendation 4 below).

Recommendation 4: Continue to enhance inclusion measures. The ESC, in general, should strive for the greater inclusivity of participants from vulnerable backgrounds as well as providing greater support to organisations that focus their activities on these target groups. The opportunities the programme can provide for young people coming from disadvantaged situations should be promoted and made more visible. In order to enhance the inclusion measures, good practices among organisations should be collected and exchanged at the European and the national level.

A greater inclusion of third country participants should be considered, for example, through establishing a specific ESC visa category. Creating an ESC-specific visa category could simplify this process. The provision of financial and legal support connected to visa procedures should be included among the support offered under the ESC. Furthermore, the role of sending organisations should be clarified further.

An expansion of the age limits to include younger and older volunteers than the current 18-30 age group could facilitate greater participation.

Recommendation 5: Improve the IT and functioning of the online platform. The IT environment accompanying the ESC is deemed as highly volatile and not fit for the purpose and aims of the programme. Further investment into the user-friendliness of the online platform should be made in order to continue increasing the number of participants and funded projects. Training opportunities complemented by instructional videos on how to use the tools should be developed to support the usability of the online platform and the IT tools.

It would be advantageous to create a centralised platform where grant holders can upload contract amendments. Currently, this can only be done by emailing the NAs, which often leads to delays in the implementation of the projects.

Recommendation 6: Consider establishing a programme committee. A programme committee similar to the one that exists for Erasmus+ should be established. As a result of creating such a committee, political awareness of the programme and its importance to the integration of youth into the society would be strengthened, which may in turn lead to increased awareness-raising efforts at the European and national levels.

Recommendation 7: Improve visibility of the portfolio of funded projects. The European Commission should increase the transparency, searchability and findability of the funding and tender opportunities portal (Single Electronic Data Interchange Area, SEDIA) where ESC calls and funded projects are published to allow stakeholders and external parties to download and analyse project data per programme. In its current format, very limited analysis can be carried out on Commission programme implementation, which limits the transparency of allocated funding.

Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: <http://bit.ly/3Eq7Nkv>

More information on Policy Department research for CULT: <https://research4committees.blog/cult/>



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