

What's needed from the next EU long-term budget? Civil society in education and training reviews the current proposal

The [Lifelong Learning Platform - European Civil Society for Education](#) - is the largest representative of civil society working in education and training at EU level. LLLPlatform reunites [45 EU networks](#) which are **direct beneficiaries and represent in their constituencies all fields of programme beneficiaries of Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, EU4Health, European Social Fund+, the Citizens, Rights, Equality and Values programmes among many others**. The mission of LLLPlatform and its members is to promote a **holistic vision of lifelong learning, from cradle to grave**, which ensures policy coherence, collaboration and joint initiatives among all levels and formats of learning, from early childhood education and care up until senior education. The LLLPlatform connects formal, non-formal and informal learning environments. In this capacity, the LLLPlatform and its members provide their assessment of the current European Commission Proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework, i.e. the EU's long-term budget for the period 2028-2034.

The contribution in this paper is consistent with and draws from the position of the [Erasmus+ Coalition](#) which LLLPlatform coordinates, of the [Joint Statement "100 billion Euros for social spending? The devil's in the details"](#) which LLLPlatform co-authored, and of Civil Society Europe, of which LLLPlatform is a member. **Therefore, this paper will voice general concerns of civil society with the MFF, as well as provide inputs on the Proposals for Regulations for Erasmus+ and European Social Fund+.**

An Erasmus+ budget fit for the future

The LLLPlatform and its members welcome the **stand-alone Erasmus+ programme** which has been safeguarded, considering it is the EU's [most recognisable flagship initiative and considering its tremendous impact with a small budget allocation](#). However, the proposed budget of 40.8 billion EUR does not represent an increase. It is the outcome of merging the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programme (1.009 billion EUR) and an adaptation to inflation. Despite the nominal rise, the share of Erasmus+ within the new MFF (2028-2034) will be lower than in the current framework, meaning that,

This reaction draws from and is consistent with the work of civil society coalitions on the MFF.

in relative terms, the programme will receive a smaller portion of the EU budget (especially when accounting for the merging of the European Solidarity Corps (ESC).

Moreover, based on existing calculations, a budget of 46 billion EUR would be required in 2028 to maintain Erasmus+ at the level that it will have in 2027. **This budget proposal represents a cut to the budget and the education and training stakeholders demand a five-time Erasmus+ budget increase according to the [Mario Draghi report](#).**

Concise objectives for effective implementation

The proposed objectives put a major and unbalanced focus on labour market needs in comparison to the current programme period. With existing funds such as the European Competitiveness Fund, Erasmus+ does not need to focus on sectoral interests, but rather to foster interdisciplinarity, and provide space for the holistic development of each learner across sectors. **Lifelong learning can contribute to competitiveness, preparedness and the labour market, but it can do so only when it is treated as a goal in itself. As soon as lifelong learning is instrumentalised to serve particular labour market interests, the Europeans will experience a narrowed down learning pathway which will under-prepare them for the world ahead, hence hindering the competitiveness that the EU tries to achieve.** European competitiveness cannot be reduced solely to STEM.

We welcome the additional objective on active citizenship and European identity being introduced as a separate specific objective. Civil society warns, however, that it needs to be implemented transversally, towards all programme actions given that citizenship competences are transversal competences. This cannot be linked solely with the Erasmus+ actions foreseen to promote solidarity.

The expansion to seven specific objectives blur the legacy of the four transversal priorities which were present in the 2021 Regulation. This is intended to provide more flexibility, but there is a danger of confusion for the beneficiaries, delay in implementation until new objectives are mainstreamed, and dilution of the priorities in the 2021-2027 programme which are not yet fully implemented. **The LLLPlatform warns of the need to rephrase the current objectives to make sure repetition and overlap are avoided, while also simplifying the numerous targets listed under individual objectives.** This will provide clarity for beneficiaries and ensure that they can contribute to the programme's objectives in an effective manner.

To better align the objectives with the ethos of the programme, LLLPlatform and its members encourage the inclusion of the following objectives among the current list:

- **The cooperation between the different sectors** in education, training, youth and sport for the promotion of a holistic lifelong learning vision
- **The recognition and validation of non-formal, informal and prior learning and transversal competences** as Erasmus+ must also make meaningful contribution to support learners to use the competences developed through its actions

The Erasmus+ without civil society is in danger of gridlock

The new Erasmus+ proposal does not provide enough guarantees for civil society cooperation. There is no reference to organisational support for civil society, which is key to an inclusive and sustainable programme governance. This support is clearly mentioned in the Erasmus+ regulation from 2021 and has **contributed to ensure that civil society networks can represent the experiences of beneficiaries, can collect good practices and the technical challenges that they experienced, and can compile analyses to improve the implementation of the programme.** This work has significantly helped the European Commission identify the areas in which the programme and its technical tools for implementation had to be improved. Furthermore, **civil society networks have tremendously contributed to improve the outreach of the Erasmus+ programme,** especially to newcomers, explaining the inner workings and details of the programme to beneficiaries on the ground that otherwise might lack the resources to fully engage in the programme. **Civil society networks have been performing capacity building for Erasmus+ beneficiaries, facilitating matchmaking, partnership building, and cross-sectoral collaboration to promote a true vision of lifelong learning.** Without structural support, this work which glues together the different parts of the Erasmus+ programme will be seriously diminished putting **the Erasmus+ community in danger of being fragmented which will have long-lasting repercussions on the achievement of the programme objectives.** This is particularly important, given that the mixture between direct and indirect management is what strengthens the European dimension of the programme, and the beneficiaries working through the direct management approach can ensure an EU-wide approach.

Is everything new with Erasmus+ good?

The Erasmus+ proposal brings a series of novelties, out of which some are welcome, some need further clarification, and some are deemed unfeasible or problematic by the stakeholders. The education and training civil society community **welcomes the two-pillar structure instead of the previously used Key Action structure.** This provides for more flexibility on engaging with the programme, simplifies in a manner that does not make the programme unrecognisable for beneficiaries, and it smartly groups actions for further efficiency in application and evaluation. Though the pillars are welcome, **the second pillar (Capacity Building Support) needs some changes.** Effectively acting as a merger between Key Action 2 and Key Action 3, **the second pillar lacks sufficient references to policy development.** The aim of policy development support was for EU Member States and beneficiaries to work together to exact policy change with long-term impact that could advance the Erasmus+ objectives. **Projects on validation and recognition of prior learning and/or of non-formal and informal learning, on development of competence frameworks, on adapting teacher training, among many other systemic initiatives were facilitated in this way.** Without clear reference to policy development and incentives for Member States to engage in piloting new initiatives, this will lead to Erasmus+ failing to tackle the most meaningful challenges affecting all lifelong learning sectors.

A novelty which requires more clarification is the **focus on large-scale and flagship initiatives.** The LLLPlatform and its members welcome the focus on European University Alliances, Centres for Vocational Excellence, Erasmus+ Teacher Academies, among others. With necessary tweaks and an

implementation that takes into consideration beneficiaries' feedback, these initiatives have a great potential. Nevertheless, such actions stand on the shoulders of the numerous small-scale partnerships which set the basis for scalability. **Therefore, the LLLPlatform and its members demand assurance that the small-scale partnerships will continue to receive great attention and that newcomers to the programme will be supported equitably,** just as those beneficiaries currently working on large-scale initiatives.

The LLLPlatform and its members reject the novelty of removing sector-specific earmarking of funding. The new proposal needs to return to this model. The EU has a legal obligation to ensure legal certainty and legitimate expectations. Failing to introduce earmarking infringes the EU financial regulations and TFEU that require the EU to have sound financial management, budgetary specificity and transparency. Beneficiaries cannot plan the work ahead without knowing the available budget, creating an instability which will directly impact on the implementation and the results of the programme. Moreover, without earmarked funding we run the risk of focusing on sectors that have been successfully absorbing funding, while neglecting areas in which the most disadvantaged learners of all ages, and beneficiaries find themselves. **The aim of the programme should be to upscale what works successfully, while tackling priorities which lag behind such as increasing the rate of adults in education and training, supporting educators to engage in learning mobility, increasing access of pupils to learning mobility, and ensuring that the most disadvantaged learners can engage smoothly in the programme.** Sacrificing earmarking in the name of flexibility is a false trade-off, as this will make the programme simply inaccessible to a majority of beneficiaries under the chaos that it will ensue. In the absence of earmarking, the second most preferred solution would be the **establishment of a multi-year allocation per sector with a minimum percentage, decided together with the main representatives of the Erasmus+ beneficiaries. Any decision taken unilaterally by the European Commission will not be acceptable.**

The new article referring to **partial association** is a great innovation that can support associated countries to benefit from centralised calls under the Erasmus+ programme. However, **the text needs to be amended to clarify that partial association can be the first step in fully joining the programme, without preventing countries which have made significant progress from full association.** The novelty is acceptable only as long as it will not prevent countries from fully joining the programme.

The Erasmus+ Talent Scholarships is a novel initiative and a potentially important component of the Union of Skills. **However, the proposal lacks detail and should be further developed with stakeholders, including those representing higher education institutions and students.** The initiative should build on current programmes such as Erasmus Mundus, while not impacting current mobility flows. It is unclear if such scholarships will cover a full learning programme, for which level of learning they apply, or if they would include an international component. If the scholarships are overly prescriptive there is a risk for funding on particular sectors to be discontinued in the middle of a learning programme, creating instability both for students and higher education institutions.

Furthermore, as the scholarship scheme aims to increase European competitiveness, we believe that it should work closely with and be funded by the European Competitiveness Fund.

The merger between the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes can be accepted by the LLLPlatform and its members only as long as the identity and mission of each programme is retained. The current mainstreaming of ESC objectives, priorities and actions across the proposal for a regulation is unclear for beneficiaries and risks diluting the ESC. **There is a need for a specific article which details the ESC and its actions.**

All indicators relevant to each programme under the next MFF exist under the [Budget expenditure tracking and performance framework](#). The LLLPlatform and its members are concerned that the current framework, discussing the various indicators, does not yet establish targets. In the absence of this, at this stage, it is difficult for beneficiaries to contribute to the negotiations of the programme. However, the **LLLPlatform and its members insist on including within the framework the learning mobility targets as committed under the [Council Recommendation Europe on the Move](#). They are currently missing.**

A possible novelty that has not been introduced in the proposal is the place of the 'Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve' initiative ([ALMA](#)) in the next MFF. Given its mobility focus and the expertise of Erasmus+ beneficiaries with this process, civil society would actively work together with the EU institutions to find a solution to integrate ALMA in the Erasmus+ programme.

The voice of stakeholders in negotiations and governance of the next Erasmus+

As the different funds are negotiated across different arenas of policy making, education and training beneficiaries will be bypassed. To this end, civil society demands its systematic inclusion across the negotiation process. More specifically, in relation to Erasmus+, it is crucial to **bring back in the proposal references to the Erasmus+ Programme Committee, and ensure a renewed participation of civil society networks representing beneficiaries in the programme to the meetings.** The LLLPlatform and its members need to be structurally involved in any decision-making that will define how the programme will be operationalised in synergy with the other funding programmes of the EU. Without this, the programme cannot be defined in the most effective way and it will miss the buy-in of the beneficiaries as well as the capacity buildings that networks do to support beneficiaries to navigate the new programme. In the absence of the involvement of stakeholders in decision-making, the programme's implementation is doomed to fail in achieving the programme objectives.

Connecting programmes in the new MFF

The Erasmus+ proposal is conceived in synergy with proposals for regulations for AgoraEU, the European Competitiveness Fund, the European Social Fund+ and Horizon Europe. This list is not exhaustive but the above are the most connected to the mission of Erasmus+. To this end, below you can find specific recommendations from the education and training civil society on each.

ESF+

- Return to a dedicated ESF+ budget line or ensure that the 14% “social spending” target is focused solely on ESF+ and not spread across multiple funds.
- Ensure the involvement of local and regional stakeholders, and civil society in the development and implementation of the National and Regional Partnership Plans.
- Re-establish minimum earmarks for social inclusion, child poverty, and material deprivation.
- Re-establish the enabling conditions, which previously ensured that Member States had effective strategies and safeguards in place before EU money was spent, now leaving investments less accountable and potentially less effective.

AgoraEU

- Provide clearer links between citizenship education joint initiatives of Erasmus+ and AgoraEU
- Absorb elements from the current Development Education Awareness Raising Programme to ensure comprehensive work on citizenship education

Horizon Europe

- Better link some of the research objectives of the programme with the long-term goals of Erasmus+ to facilitate research projects which would investigate the most relevant education and training policy aspects (curricular adaptation, methodologies for teaching and learning, validation of non-formal and informal learning, among others)

European Competitiveness Fund

- Clarify the existing synergies as for the moment it is unclear how Erasmus+ beneficiaries can access financial top-ups through the European Competitiveness Fund.

The main demands of civil society in education and training

- Increase the Erasmus+ programme budget by five times.
- Make the specific objectives more holistic, concise and easy to be implemented by beneficiaries, while enlarging their focus towards the development of transversal competences and their validation.
- Include clear references to structural support allocated to civil society cooperation and EU networks support.
- Strengthen references to policy development under Pillar 2.
- Include earmarking for each sector in education and training, as well as for youth and sports, in the new programme and or a minimum percentage per sector.
- Provide a full article explaining in detail the ESC related actions in the next Erasmus+ programme.
- Pilot the Erasmus+ Talent Scholarships and consider their inclusion in the regulation only after thorough evaluation.
- Include Europe on the Move targets in the Budget expenditure tracking and performance framework.
- Return to a dedicated ESF+ budget line or ensure that the 14% “social spending” target is focused solely on ESF+ and not spread across multiple funds.
- Re-establish the Erasmus+ Programme Committee in the regulation and ensure participation is expanded to the civil society networks representing the beneficiaries.