

ERASMUS+ IMPLEMENTATION SURVEY RESULTS 2021-2023

**LIFELONG
LEARNING
PLATFORM**
EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY FOR EDUCATION



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INTRODUCTION

As the 2021-2027 programme period of the Erasmus+ has reached its mid-point, the Lifelong Learning Platform ran the Erasmus+ Implementation survey over the second half of 2023. The survey's main purpose was analysing the experience of EU-wide networks representing different programme beneficiaries with the current Erasmus+ programme period. The survey was targeted at organisations working at European level with a total of 42 responses collected. The target group was selected to gather through them a diverse range of experiences coming from the local, regional, national and European levels and tap into their expertise dealing with EU level institutions and programmes.

The Lifelong Learning Platform aims to support decision makers by presenting them with an evaluation from the experience of beneficiary representatives - on what is working well, what could be improved and what is missing in the current programme, and thereby provide recommendations that can be useful for the implementation of the second half of this programming period and reflections on the programme's future. However, this represents a temporary picture for the period 2021-2023 characterised by the Covid19 impact and further work will follow to complete the reflections for the future programme.

The main results of the 2021-2023 survey include:

- ◆ A vast majority of respondents (83,33%) have a high degree of experience with the programme. Moreover, 69,05%% of respondents involve their own members in consortium building, revealing the **power of networks** for mainstreaming Erasmus+.
- ◆ Respondents highly appreciate the programme, with the report presenting recommendations for improvements, but strongly supporting its **continuation and strengthening**. The programme priorities are well regarded with recommendations from respondents emphasising more **social inclusion, sustainability, cross-sector cooperation, citizenship and digital competences**.

- ◆ Though social inclusion remains a tenet of the programme, only 41,46%% of respondents perceive positively its consideration of **individuals' socio-economic needs and the needs of different learners**.
- ◆ The survey covers the application, implementation and reporting phases, to assess specific areas of improvement. Overall, the respondents are satisfied with the **Programme Guide's** relevance and comprehensiveness, though highlighting the need to improve its **user-friendliness**.
- ◆ Respondents wish for **simplified project applications**, especially considering the 'Impact' section of the application which was rated by 85,11% of respondents as difficult to fill in.
- ◆ Regarding the implementation stage, a majority of the respondents experienced bureaucratic difficulties while **the level of funding remains a problematic issue**, with 71,43% of respondents finding it **insufficient to cover their real needs or meet the programme objectives**. Moreover, different interpretations of rules or evaluation practices were flagged by respondents, who called for more coherence and consistency across National Agencies.
- ◆ The vast majority of respondents (80,49%) find that Erasmus+ allows them to implement cross-sector cooperation projects, suggesting **diversity of cooperation within the programme is being put more into operation**. These results are satisfying overall considering the benefits that cross-sector cooperation can bring about for all stakeholders involved.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Stemming from the above findings, which are further detailed in the report, a series of recommendations were developed for policy and decision makers to consider.



FUNDING

- **Increase and optimise the Erasmus+ budget** and its various envelopes. The value of the programme requires upscaling the funding to achieve the crucial objectives. This should come together with a balanced increase across all envelopes which **does not favour or discriminate against sectors or formats of learning**.
- **Implement a more flexible approach to funding across Erasmus+**: smoother adaptation to inflation, ability to shift funds easier in case of new challenges, and with possibilities for regranting (deemed as functioning well in other programmes such as CERV).
- **Maintain the lump sum format for Erasmus+** which should be adapted to living costs, but ensure proper guidance is provided to beneficiaries and agencies' staff at different levels to ensure that the simplification which they bring forward becomes a reality.



ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESS

- **Simplify application procedures**, cutting repetitive parts and focusing on guiding beneficiaries towards a quality proposal.
- Review the technical functioning of the portals and streamline the administrative tasks as currently the process of **reporting proves to be unnecessarily time consuming**, partially caused also by the technical problems experienced across digital platforms.
- **Simplify the online portals, increase their user-friendliness, technical support and boost their inclusion features**. Beneficiaries noted a great need for improvements in these areas given the various instances of malfunctions of the portals they had to face.



COHERENCE AND SYNERGIES BETWEEN CENTRALISED AND DECENTRALISED LEVELS

- **Provide clearer guidance for and enforce a monitoring on how Agencies are implementing the guidelines** as across multiple NAs and the centralised levels there are multiple points of tension and inconsistency. This should be complemented by more **training for all officers** at centralised and decentralised levels to ensure that each can support the beneficiaries and avoid beneficiaries reporting different experiences with project officers from the European Commission and/or NAS.
- **Implement proper consultations with beneficiaries**, potentially even by organising target groups for reflections on calls, a practice which is performed across some National Agencies, but not across the board. This is another example of the discrepancies of how different National Agencies and EACEA approach the programme



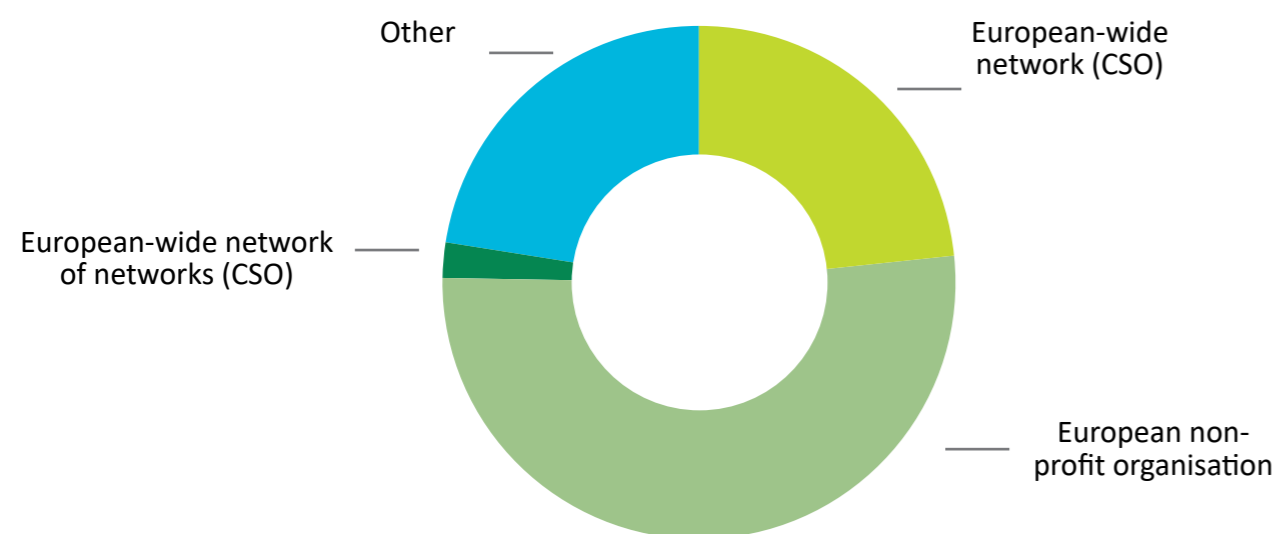
PROGRAMME PRIORITIES AND LINKS WITH OTHER EU INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMMES

- **Reinforce the priorities of the programme**, especially the one focused on inclusion, as respondents flagged the fact that in the past years it has had an increasing focus on economic growth and employability.
- **Improve the programme's synergies with other programmes** such as the Technical Support Instrument, European Social Fund+, European Regional Development Fund, Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV), and other connected programmes.

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

Type of organisation

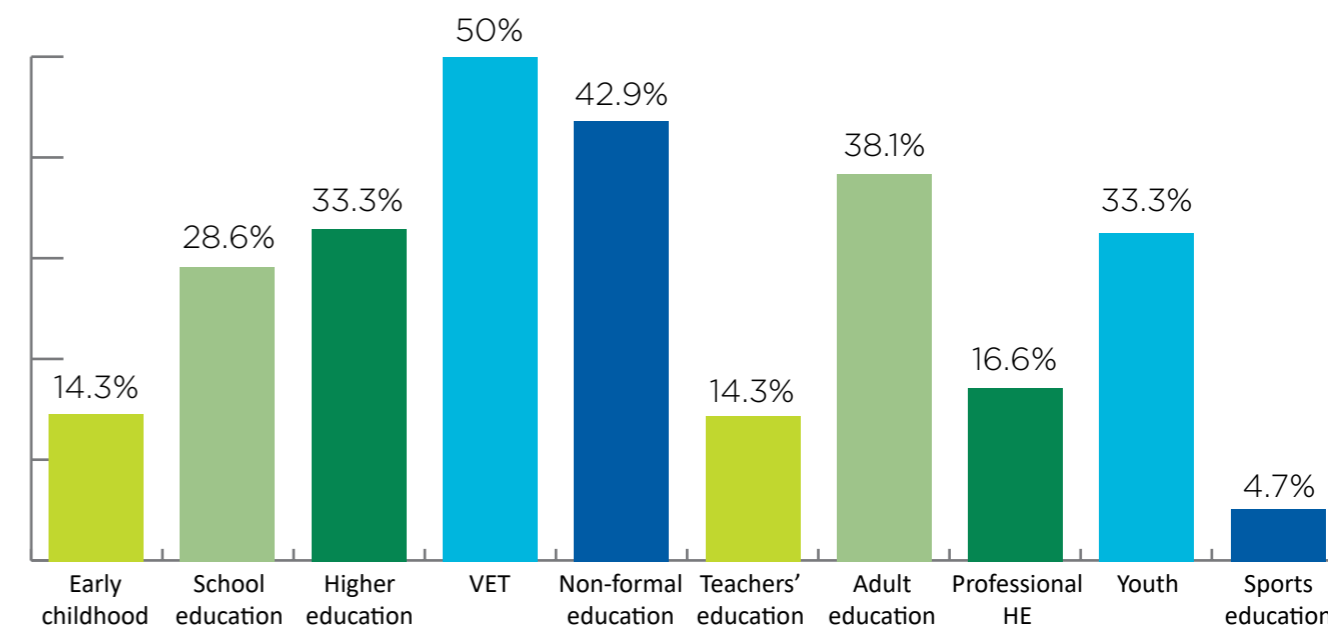
The European-wide networks are the majority of the 42 respondents with 52,38%. European non-profit organisations come second with 23,81%. Within the 21,43% that chose the option “other”, we can find international umbrella organisations and other sector specific associations (Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training). The list is closed by European-wide networks of networks (2,38%)¹.



Field of specialisation

As with previous editions of the Report, the **respondents come from different fields and sectors of education and training**. The majority are active in vocational education and training (50%), followed by non-formal education (42,86%) and adult education (38,10%). Both youth and higher education reached 33,33%. The rest of the respondents comprises organisations belonging to: school education (28,57%), professional higher education (16,67%), teacher education and early childhood education and care, both with 14,29%. Organisations working in the fields of sports represented 4,76%.

¹ **European non-profit organisation:** A non-profit organisation registered in an EU country that focuses its work at European level. **European-wide network:** A civil society organisation that gathers other CSOs working in a specific sector at national, regional or local levels in a number of European countries or has national, regional or local representations. **European-wide network of networks:** a civil society organisation gathering other CSOs from different areas working at European level (i.e. Lifelong Learning Platform).



Respondents' experience and roles with Erasmus+ and/or previous Lifelong Learning Programme

The majority of respondents (83,33%) have a minimum of 5 years of experience with Erasmus+ and/or previous Lifelong Learning Programme. This characteristic indicates that the **responses come from organisations very familiar with the programme**, with how it operates and how it evolved over time. This group is followed by 11,90% with 1 to 4 years of experience and both the organisations with one year of experience and the newcomers who have not applied but are planning to apply in the coming period (2,38%).

In terms of experiences regarding the roles taken on by the respondents as part of Erasmus+ projects and/or operating grants, the **majority have experience both as coordinator and partner** (64,29%), a similar result to previous editions. The organisations that have had only the role of partner represent 23,81% and finally the ones that have taken on only the role of coordinator constitute 11,90%.

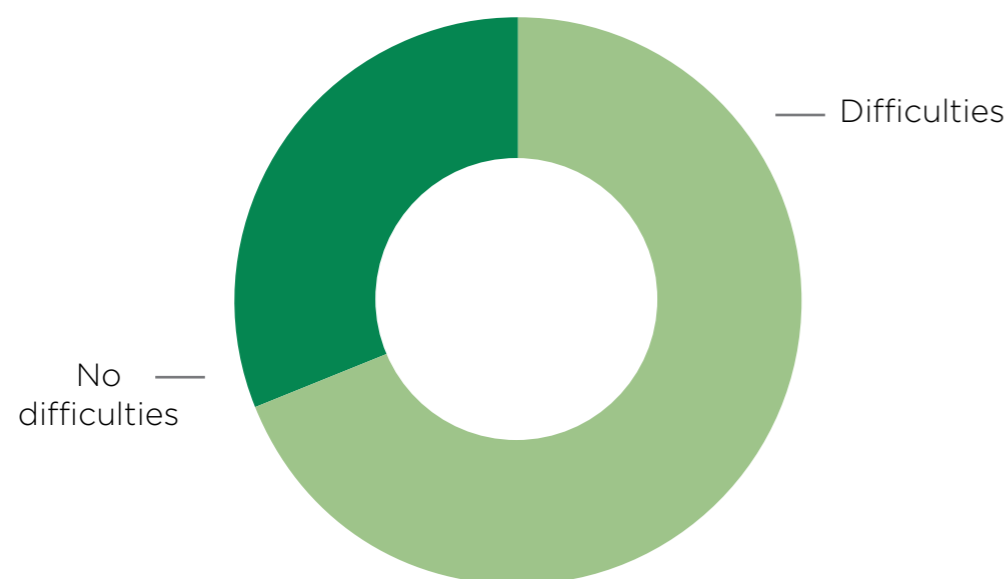
Respondents receiving operating grants from Erasmus+

In this edition of the survey, the respondents that received an operating grant (civil society cooperation framework agreements) from Erasmus+ represented 76,19% (over 25 points higher than in the 2019 edition). This year, 9,52% of organisations stated that they do not receive an operating grant (versus 40% in 2020) while 14,29% of respondents mentioned that they are planning to apply for an operating grant.

IMPLEMENTATION

Administrative burden

Respondents were asked about **administrative difficulties during project implementation**. In line with the report's previous edition, the majority of respondents (69,05%) reported encountering some kind of bureaucratic difficulty in implementing a project (2019 edition, 68,42%).



The **effects of the COVID-19 pandemic** were noted by survey respondents. Several processes had to be postponed, rescheduled or shaped in a different setting. This situation affected other processes within the project and/or clashed with budget lines. In terms of administration, organisations underlined that despite the simplification through lump sum grants and the focus of the evaluation on project outputs, the burden to keep records similar to real costs budgets still remains since the agencies deem this necessary in case of an audit. The situation causes confusion since it remains unclear what is necessary to document and why (i.e. inconsistent interpretation of rules by NAs, improper communication of rule changes, different national legislation on accountancy requirements, etc.). Therefore, there is an urgent need to clarify this aspect and ensure EACEA and all NAs provide accurate information on this regard.

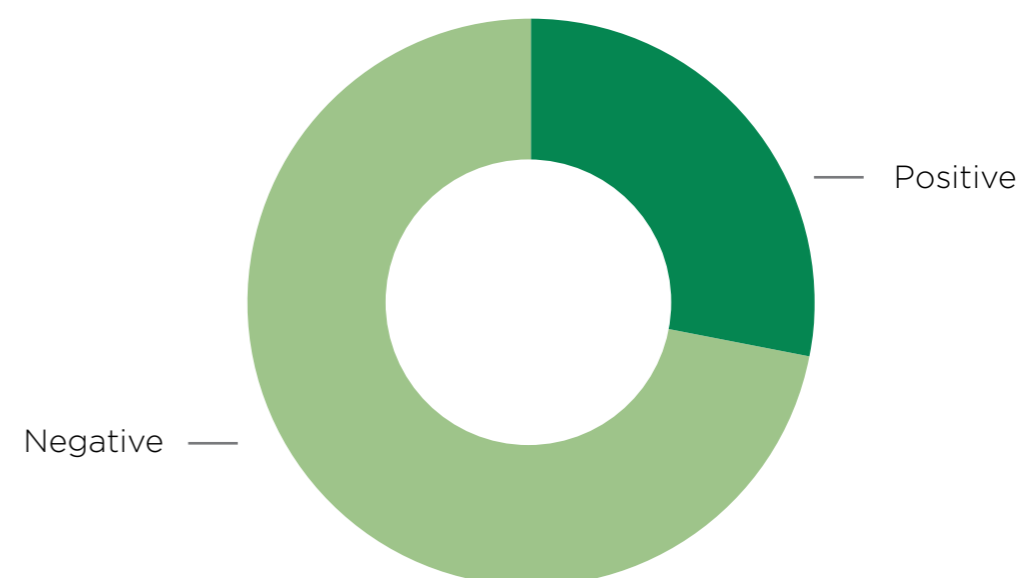
Another burden comes from the **technical issues** of the EU online system (Sygma). Some respondents were unable to submit their reports on time due to issues with visualisation of the periodic reporting tabs. Organisations reported that the support provided by the Helpdesk and project officers was not fully accurate and tended to put the burden on beneficiaries even when it was found that the platform was the one causing issues. This delays the instalment

disbursements and snowballs to impact the entire project implementation. Respondents strongly suggest looking into a comprehensive adaptation of the Sygma platform as it is currently unaligned with Erasmus+. Improving the system would also support reducing the burden on coordinators since now they need to spend a considerable amount in guiding smaller organisations on how to navigate the system as well as needing additional time to copy paste the application form to the system.

In connection to **reporting**, organisations noticed that evaluators focus strictly on complying with the guidelines for evaluators, neglecting the quality of project outcomes. The project reporting was likened by survey respondents to an audit instead of a qualitative evaluation of project outcomes. Participants suggest that the reporting process should be a moment for funding agencies to help and guide organisations to realise the best possible version of their project. Another suggestion included having the possibility to resort to mediation bodies in the event of disagreements with project officers. The administrative issues around reporting also extended to the Operating Grants received by a majority of survey participants (76,19%). The issues included the changes in how personnel is counted which was introduced when the implementation was already ongoing, affecting the implementation phase given that proposals had been built based on the initial information provided.

Financial coherence

Much like in the report's previous editions, **results for this question remain negative**. Over two thirds of the organisations that participated in the survey (71,43% versus 73.68% in 2019 and 72.73% in 2018) consider the funding to be insufficient and unable to cover the projects' or organisations' (operating grant applicants) real needs.



Inflation was noted as having a significant impact on the funding. Increases in the budget of Erasmus+ in 2021 were positive to address previous increases in inflation, therefore, it quickly became insufficient to deal with the ongoing fluctuations since then. This situation does not only affect staff costs, but also travelling costs and other activities such as organising events. Organisations need to adapt to this situation while developing quality deliverables without an adjustment in the funds they received. The lack of adaptation in the budget available for next calls leads to less quality proposals which need to work with unsuitable budgets or with proposals that over-promise and cannot be implemented with the set budget.

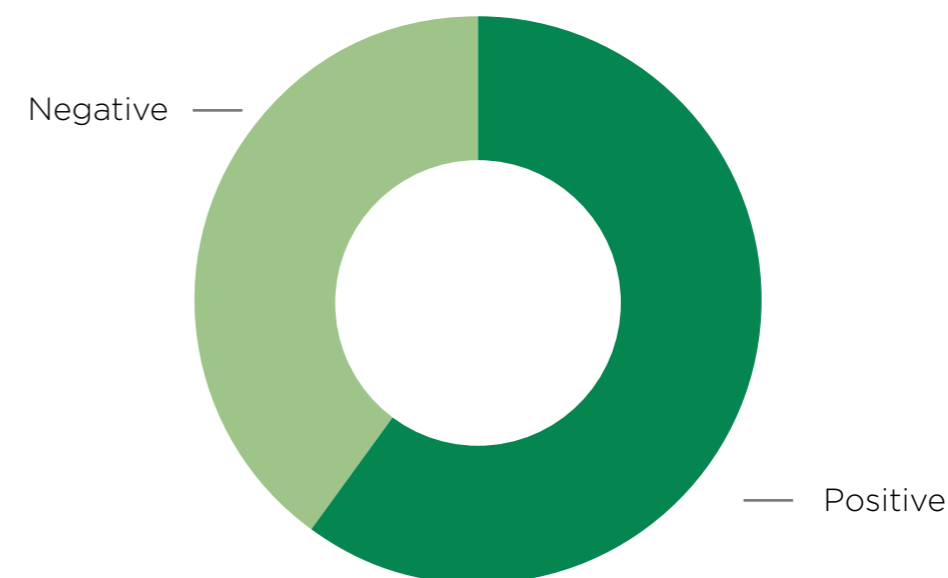
It was highlighted by some organisations that the sufficiency of funds also depends on the types of grant. For example, **the operating grant is too low to cover the real operating costs and the staff time needed to implement the work programme**. In other cases, despite the lump sums funding, some NAs still expected for the KA2 projects to provide real-cost budgets with daily rates that are in line with the daily rates applied until 2021. Considering how much the economic situation has changed since then, Erasmus+ projects are becoming causes for heavy financial burdens and even losses in organisations when they should be supporting them and their staff. Respondents consider that Erasmus+ could be better aligned with other EU programmes where staff costs are sufficiently addressed. The need for co-funding is understood, but it is often complicated to provide a decent salary to the staff with Erasmus+ funds allocated for a project/operating grant and organisations need to put effort into alternative sources of funding. Otherwise, organisations risk underpaying and even risking the wellbeing of their staff. This situation goes against what the Erasmus+ programme wishes to achieve and it has been an issue in previous programme iterations.

Respondents noted that the funding is insufficient for covering the needs in terms of **accessibility** which many times cannot be calculated during the application period. There is also an issue with **translation services** not being covered, with respondents speculating that this is due to the development of AI tools, which do not always work for languages with less number of speakers in the EU. Respondents highlighted that the grants were underestimated for mobility activities (including those in KA2 projects). They do not properly cover the costs of travel, stay abroad and organisational work, especially given inflation. These aspects related to inclusion in the programme were highlighted in our 2019 report.

Another issue underlined by respondents referred to the **project impact**. Organisations considered the budget for communication, dissemination, evaluation and sustainability to be insufficient. The funding agency expects the beneficiary to sustain the impact of the project without sizable support to ensure this can be carried out effectively by the project partners. Respondents suggest that this is an aspect that needs to be assessed in the programme to determine a better approach to support beneficiaries in the sustainability of their initiatives as this is a way in which the Commission can ensure that the funding is spent effectively and efficiently by scaling up good practices. For operating grants, respondents consider that it could be more tailored to the needs for policy and advocacy efforts as well as raising awareness and capacity building activities.

Centralised management

EACEA's implementation and management of centralised actions continues to receive a majority of positive rating among respondents, though less than in previous editions (59,52% versus 68.75%). 40,48% of organisations providing a negative response show clear signs of a need for improvement.



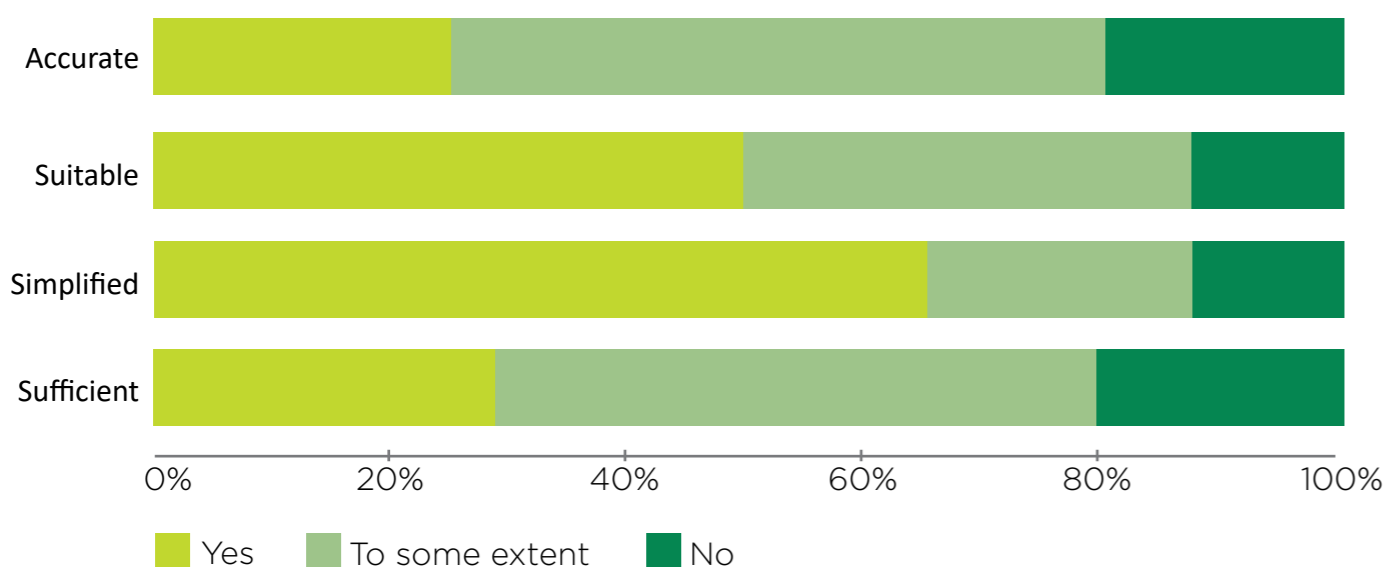
The ones deeming EACEA management as well-functioning offered some feedback regarding aspects that could be improved. They highlight that the programme could have more **flexibility** and attempt to **get closer to beneficiaries** to offer more meaningful and targeted support through regular exchange. As with previous questions, it was underlined that the cooperation with NAs is closer and the project officers seem to have more relevant experience in Erasmus+ projects, making the cooperation smoother.

It was also recommended that **more support and responsiveness** is needed from EACEA in a more approachable communication style that provides more empathy towards beneficiaries instead of automatic exchanges through the ICT platform. When interacting with project officers during info days and information sessions, the officials do not seem to have the best overview of implementation on the ground especially when it comes to the simplifications. Communication through Microsoft Teams and the use of the IT platform was also underlined as being challenging.

Other respondents noted that although they had helpful officers, the **online system was faulty** and inefficient. Therefore, there needs to be more effort placed in the training and preparation of project officers to ensure a coherent approach across the different projects, but also proper investment into correcting the IT tools. In the meantime, beneficiaries should enjoy more **flexibility**.

Lump sum system

In this edition the lump sum system is rated positively when it comes to being **simplified** (58,70% yes) and **suitable** (45,65%), a similar result to previous years. Still, **sufficiency** remains an issue, with 50,00% showing that it is only sufficient to some extent and less than a third (30,43%) finding it sufficient. Accuracy is another aspect that continues to lag behind, with only 26,09% respondents answering yes and 58,70% as only to some extent.



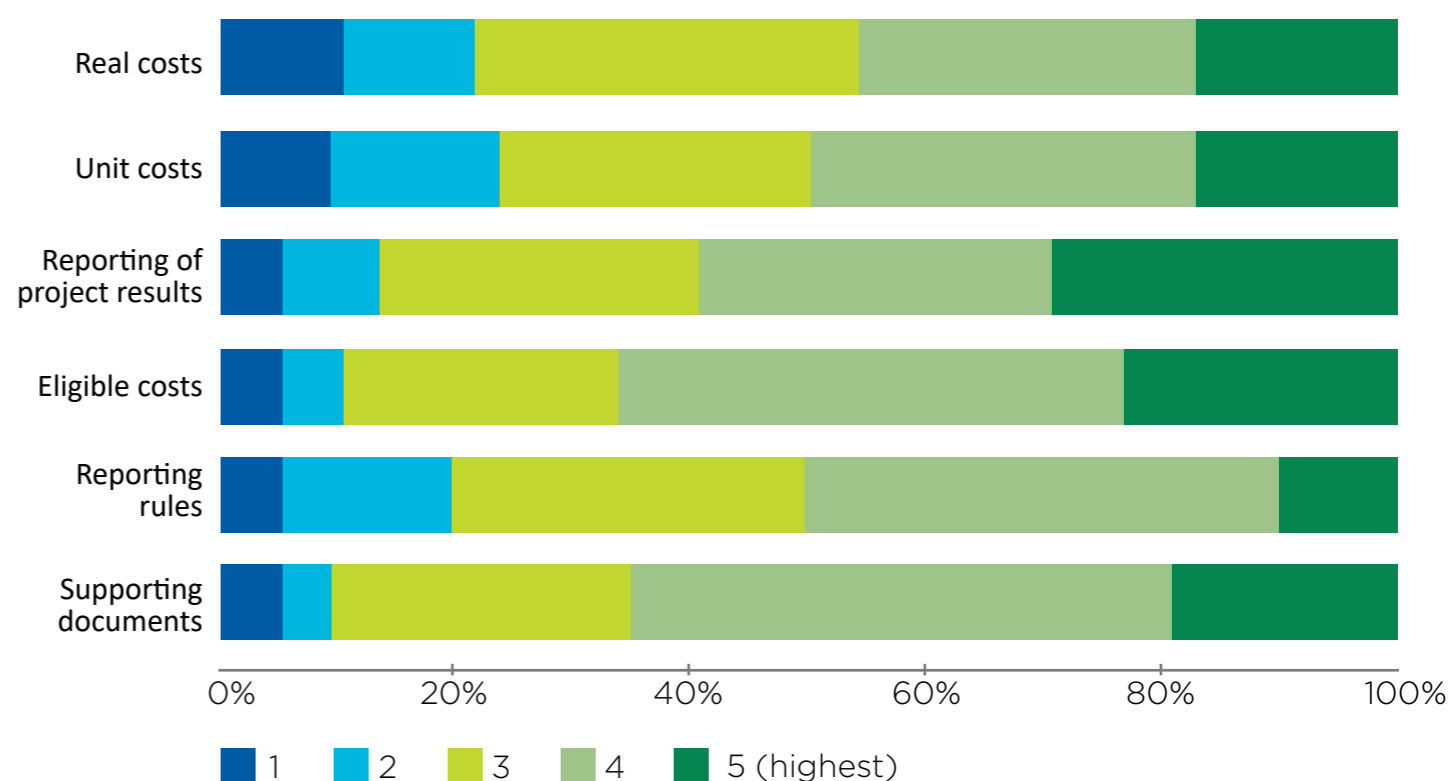
Beneficiaries offered feedback and suggestions to improve the implementation of the lump sum system. While acknowledging this system is much better than real costs (i.e. more flexible to adapt to unforeseen circumstances), participants underline that the new system required beneficiaries to adapt their financial management systems. As a result, mismatches in adaptations created confusion and miscommunication. This confusion is extended by requests from NAs which lead to drafting real cost budgets in case of audits when the aim was to simplify the work of beneficiaries and allow them to focus more on quality and outcomes of the project. This is an aspect that respondents expect to be solved in upcoming rounds of calls and more clarification in terms of the simplification is expected also when the first round of lump sum projects are checked and audits are completed.

Other issues included the aforementioned uncertainty regarding the number of staff, the amount of flexibility allowed to beneficiaries and how the results will be evaluated. Regardless of how great the lump sum system could eventually work, what worries respondents is that the lump sums are already too low and unrealistic in the context of ever fluctuating costs. Some respondents suggest that coordinators should be able to move funds between packages/partners, if there is a general agreement without having to go through time-consuming amendments.

Administrative and financial guidelines

In this section, a key document is the guidelines provided for administrative and financial matters. Participants in the survey were asked about their ease of understanding these guidelines, with a score of 1 being the lowest - very difficult to understand and a score of 5 being the highest - easy to understand. The easiest aspects to grasp for respondents were the **supporting documents** and **eligible costs** (63,83% each of 4 to 5). They were followed by **reporting of project results** with 57,45% (from 4 to 5). The more confusing aspects were the **reporting rules** (51,06%) and the **unit costs** (53,19%), with the majority rating the guidelines as moderate to least understandable. Since all aspects had less than 25% on levels 2 and 1, it can be inferred that the majority of respondents understand well or very well the administrative and financial guidelines, as would be expected from very experienced organisations.

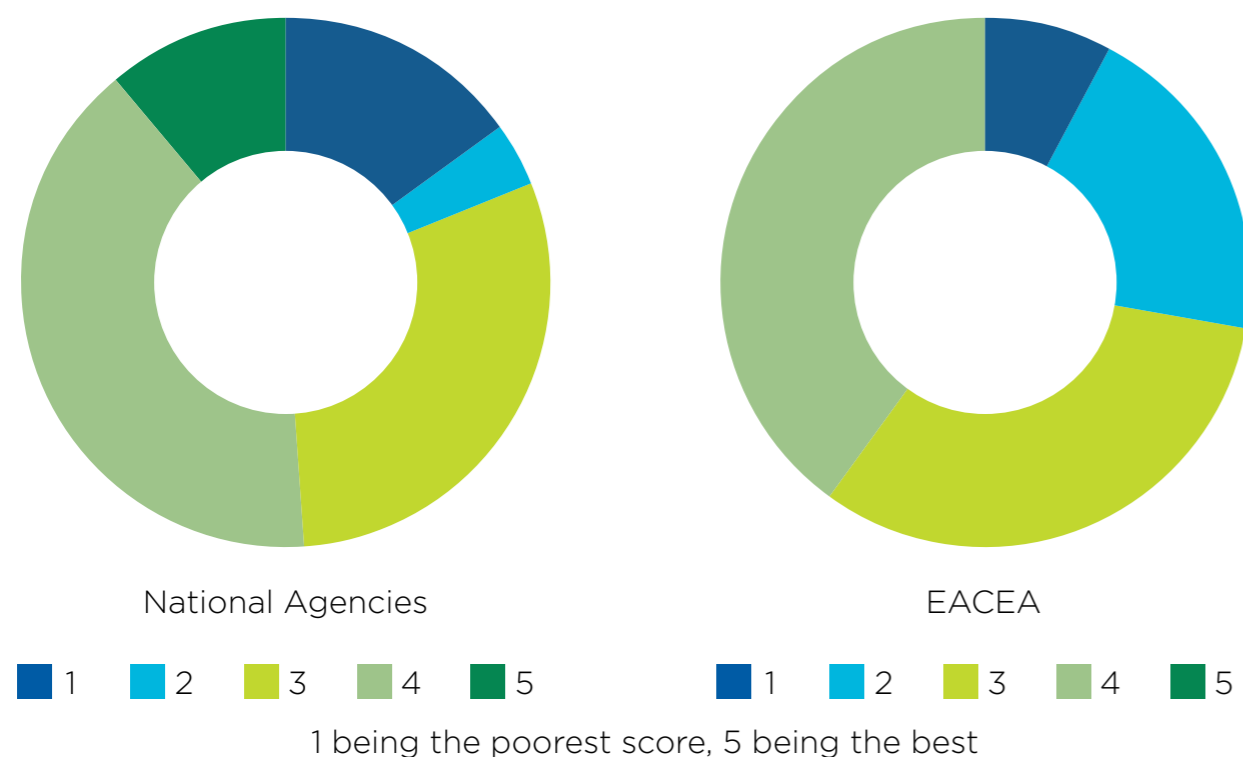
A topic that continues to be raised across the survey is the differences between the information provided and the communications from EACEA and NAs (as well as among NAs), especially when they change during the implementation phase. Some organisations suggested that **summaries of all eligibility and reporting requirements** could help them navigate the guidelines better and ease their work. The guidelines around **divisions of costs** per work package and the **person-month calculation** could be improved to ensure that it recognises the contribution of different staff categories which go beyond fully employed staff (i.e. volunteers, trainees).



Project implementation

Respondents rated the clarity of the project implementation stages (kick-off, reporting and closing for projects under a National Agency and under EACEA), with 1 being the least clear and 5 being the most clear. In this edition, a majority of respondents rated that the different stages have been the most clear with the NAs (52,94% 4 and 5), while EACEA received less than half (40,54%). It is interesting to not see a higher level of clarity from EACEA, considering the respondents come from very experienced backgrounds (no respondent rate EACEA with a 5). The results for the NAs should also be seen as an aggregate and that it is not able to express the variety of experiences that are seen with the different agencies and countries (as many countries have more than one).

Similarly to what has been shared in previous questions, respondents felt that in some cases EACEA provided contradictory information (i.e. number of staff) and that some NAs tend to apply financial rules differently in some matters (i.e. COVID activities shifted online). One organisation noted a precedent in terms of cancelling a mobility due to high risk weather conditions, which is something that will need to be reflected upon due to climate change challenges. Issues were also found in general with the online reporting system such as hiccups when receiving communications or forms not being ready in the system. It is overall clear when to start and how to report the project, but the continuous reporting and the uploading of documents still remains unclear for some.



PROGRAMME RELEVANCE

Programme objectives and priorities

Participants in the survey provided their perspectives in terms of the **alignment between the Erasmus+ programme and their main concerns as stakeholders**. In line with previous editions of the report, the majority (80.56%) consider that the objectives and actions of the Erasmus+ programme are well aligned with policy priorities in their field of work.

It was noted that the promotion of learning mobility of individuals and groups, exchange of knowledge, best practices, and sharing of experiences aligns with civil society's goals of fostering international exchange and cooperation within the sectors (especially the VET sector). Respondents praised the emphasis on **cooperation, quality, inclusion, equity, excellence, creativity, and innovation** at the organisational and policy levels as well as the focus on the priorities of **digitalisation, green transition, sustainability and gender equality**.

These respondents also mentioned that while the objectives are aligned, the **actions still need better connection to the policies** prioritised and more flexibility so they are able to shift in case of crises. In some cases it was mentioned that the difficulty is not the alignment with EU policy priorities, but that organisations at national and local level (especially in the adult education field) appear as more disconnected from the policy discourses. Multiple reasons account for this, but it must be considered that sometimes **grassroots organisations** meet the EU policy priorities without necessarily defining their organisational objectives according to them, or they do not engage directly in advocacy. Judging the quality of a project application based on the technical jargon used rather than on evaluating how the actions foreseen meet EU policy priorities defeats the purpose of the Erasmus+ programme. Another aspect mentioned was the **transparency** in certain funding calls for **sports**; where more alignment is also needed with the EU work plan on Sport. Organisations are noticing that although the focus should be on the grassroots level, more funding is going to already well-funded competitive sports and mega sporting events.

From the respondents that do not consider there is an alignment between the objectives and actions of Erasmus+ and the policy priorities of their sectors, the main concerns were the **unbalanced focus on skills- and employment-related learning, too much focus on mobility numbers and not enough on quality, also not enough attention paid to wellbeing**. Some organisations also highlighted that the actions need better alignment and that non-formal education organisations do not have dedicated funding. Other organisations suggest that the

call for proposals can further enhance specialisation as opposed to recognising the diversity with which civil society organisations work. The call for proposals can be discouraging for such organisations. Finally, in the case of school education, there are inconsistencies in the application of the Council Recommendation on automatic recognition and learning mobility in general. There is a mismatch between mentioning class exchanges while the recommendation can only be implemented through Erasmus+ projects if schools run individual pupil mobilities of 3 months or more. This shows an inconsistency into how various Council Recommendations are being mainstreamed across the Erasmus+ Programme and into how the Programme is being leveraged to meet the objectives of various EU initiatives in education and training.

Social dimension of the programme

An important aspect of the programme is whether it takes sufficient consideration of **individuals' socio-economic needs and the needs of different learners**. As in previous editions, **less than half of organisations consider that the programme is taking these aspects into account** (41,46%, 38.89% in 2019 and 48.48% in 2018). The results show a situation where improvements are still to be made for the second part of the programme and the next programme period.

From the respondents that agree with the Erasmus+ addressing the needs of learners, it was highlighted that the 2021-2027 **programme is doing much better** in this regard, especially in terms of widening the understanding of participants with fewer opportunities. Other respondents felt that while for Key Action 1 this is true, the same does not happen for calls under Key Action 2. There is a **mismatch** with the work and staff time needed to properly implement the projects.

From those disagreeing with Erasmus+ addressing the needs of learners, it was highlighted that there is still a **need to revise different parts of the programme implementation and the financial capacity** for it to ensure real inclusion. The issue with the budget is one that has also been highlighted in previous editions of the report from the previous programme. Much **more support for staff time is needed** for outreach and inclusion. Respondents suggested that more emphasis is needed on social inclusion for addressing issues related to access, diversity, and the needs of underrepresented groups, including travel. Similarly, more **consultations are needed to understand the real needs of learners** and how to better meet them and include more learners in the programme's development. Some NAs are **involving target groups for reflections** on various calls, a practice that should be mirrored across the EU and EACEA to ensure social inclusion.

A discrepancy is observed between **equality** - treating everybody equally not to discriminate against anyone - and **equity** - providing targeted support for specific people or groups of people. So while inclusion is always mentioned in the calls when it comes to implementation, organisations often see that this would need more time and more specific resources that are often not foreseen. However, when requesting materials and resources (e.g. as other costs) there is a risk of being dismissed by the donors.

Some organisations even consider that **guidelines** are not provided and the beneficiary is left to deal with these issues. In many cases the beneficiaries cannot find the possibility for real technical solutions to include more learners with fewer opportunities. This situation means that partners can only go as far as exchanging good practices among them when more support could be provided for properly funded training opportunities on this subject. Others underlined that while the broad definition of learners with fewer opportunities is good for including more people, it would require **better guidelines to develop tailored and effective actions**, rather than operate with a one-size-fits-all approach.

Participants in the survey felt that the funding under KA 1 is insufficient to cover learners' most basic needs (e.g. travel, adequate accommodation and food) as well as to provide support for people from disadvantaged backgrounds/with special learning needs. Similarly, in the VET sector, the learning mobility rates for learners are not high enough and it always presupposes the sending organisations are coming from the formal sectors and do not adjust to the needs of non-profit organisations (e.g. working with NEETS and trainees).

In terms of ensuring all learners' needs are considered, some organisations underlined that the programme can have an overt focus on economic growth and employability, irrespective of the needs and desires of learners, therefore, not addressing some key needs in other areas. Similarly, as **Erasmus+ is focused on learning it cannot be responsible for all basic needs** that make learning possible. For this effort to be more comprehensive, **synergies are needed with other programmes**.

Implementation of cross-sector cooperation projects

One of the main missions of the LLLPlatform is to facilitate cross-sectoral dialogue to foster a lifelong learning culture. The Erasmus+ programme has the potential to support cooperation across different sectors and among different types of stakeholders. This year 80,49% of the respondents find that **Erasmus+ allows them to implement cross-sector cooperation projects**. Although a downward move can be observed from 93,94% in the last edition, it remains higher than pre-2019 editions. The results suggest that the improvements made over the years in this regard have been maintained in the current programme which is very positive considering the benefits that cross-sector cooperation brings about to education and training systems and all stakeholders involved.

Alignment with the European Education Area

Given the launch of the European Education Area in 2020, it was important to learn about the perspectives of EU level organisations on the interlinkages between this strategy and the Erasmus+ programme. As it can be seen in the chart the majority of participants (80,49%) have noted a **good level of alignment between the Erasmus+ programmes and the priorities outlined in the European Education Area Communication**.

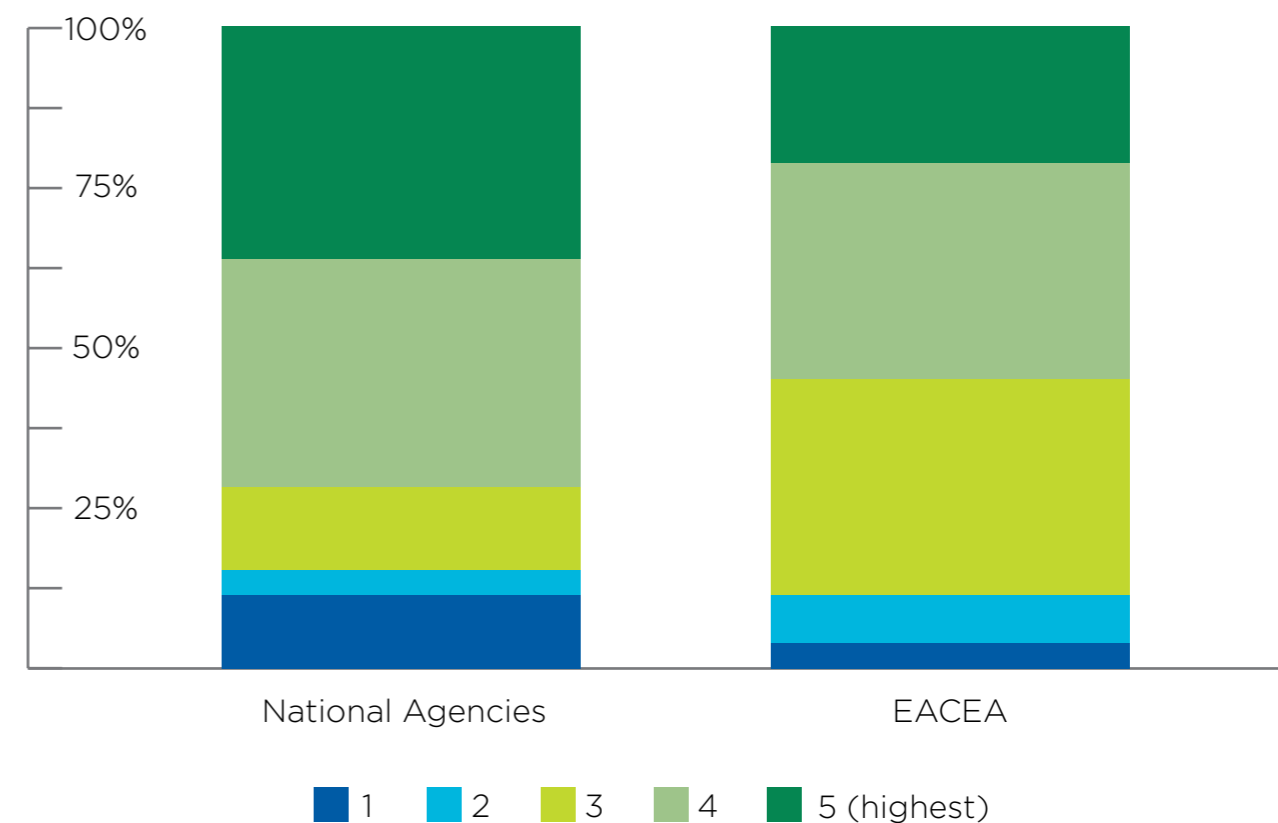
There is a consensus among all respondents that even if there is alignment **there is still room for improvement**. From the respondents that consider that there isn't, it was shared that for the green and gender dimensions, for example, it is unclear how they can be implemented. Furthermore, respondents advised to **be cautious in providing some areas more importance than others**, for example the way in which digital topics had a higher standing in the programme so far. The action and calls for proposals should be **more balanced across priorities** to ensure a holistic support to all areas of education and training.

EVALUATION PROCESS

Feedback on project applications

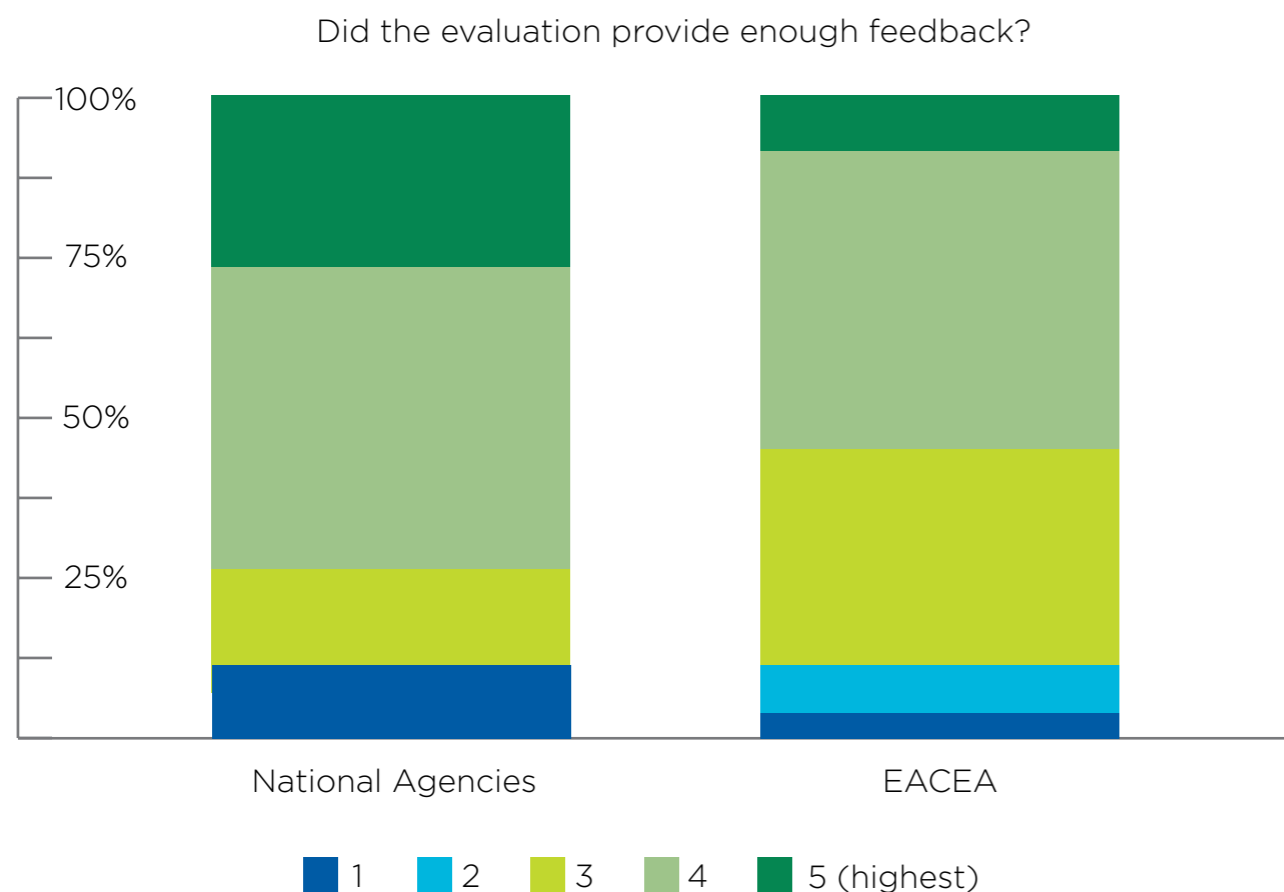
To complement the responses on the application process, participants also assessed the sufficiency of the feedback given on their project application, if applicable. The NAs, as in previous editions, had more positive results with over two thirds of respondents (71,11%) rating 4 or 5. Over half of organisations provided favourable scores to EACEA (56,67%), however, that also indicates that **a considerable share of the organisations consider they received moderate to low feedback** (43,33%). This does not provide a platform on which beneficiaries can improve access to the programme, or deliver better tailored solutions. Moreover, the **lack of transparency** - to a certain extent caused by insufficient feedback on why a proposal was evaluated in a specific way - creates mistrust in the programme and threatens to make certain relevant civil society organisations back away from engaging with the programme.

Did the evaluation provide enough feedback?



Feedback on completed projects

A similar question was posed concerning feedback on completed projects. As with the previous question, most respondents (75,00%) provided a more positive evaluation (4 and 5 in the scale) of the NAs they worked with while EACEA obtained over half of positive responses (57,89%, 4 and 5 in the scale and 31,58% at level 3). Overall, the results indicate a **good level of satisfaction with the feedback provided to completed projects** (1 = lowest, 5 = highest).



Main reasons for dissatisfaction

This question refers to the main reasons for dissatisfaction with the evaluation process, to allow respondents to provide their insights into the process as well as their suggestions for improvement. One of the aspects highlighted which could be improved referred to **more tailor made processes** for each application. Although it was recognised as something difficult

to achieve, certain aspects could be looked at, such as **going beyond quantitative aspects** (e.g. outreach numbers) to include as well qualitative ones. Having a quantitative and qualitative approach to the evaluation would ensure a better understanding of the project achievements and impact, providing for a **more comprehensive evaluation**.

Organisations suggested that in some cases the penalisation of some elements of the project or specific deliverables could have been done so due to misinterpretation of the **context of implementation**. A similar concern was presented in the previous edition of this report. Though the workload of checking thoroughly every project is vast, an evaluation of a project ought to be different from an audit-based approach where random deliverables are checked for an approximate picture of the project. It was felt by some respondents that the above situation also led to the lowering of scores given in the last few years compared to the past for projects deemed similar. An additional reason behind this provided by survey respondents, was evaluators not understanding the type of organisation they are working with and how and for whom they operate. Some organisations mentioned that it is not often clear what the agency expects from the organisations they are supporting. A suggestion would be to **improve the screening of the external evaluators** to ensure they are attuned to the context of the sectors they are evaluating and avoid misinterpretations and expectations that do not match the sector.

This issue found in the evaluation of projects does not occur in a vacuum, as it is preceded by challenges experienced by beneficiaries when receiving regular **feedback** across the project's lifespan. While in some cases the feedback is very useful, there are moments when feedback is not realistic. Meaning that if applied, it would cause financial issues for the partners since to achieve the recommendations provided more funding would be needed.

Another suggestion for improvement is on the evaluation of project proposals as at the moment there does not seem to be a consistency in terms of rejected proposals. Some NAs have proven to be very helpful, providing feedback that can help organisations, especially newcomers, improve on their shortcomings and obtain funding. In some cases a proposal is submitted without major changes apart from the timeline and it gets accepted, in other cases the feedback to rejected applications is incorporated but leads to receiving less points than in the previous evaluation. This is an issue already raised in the previous edition of the report, meaning that **there is not yet a common approach to evaluation, nor is there sufficient transparency**.



FUTURE PROGRAMME

Priorities for the future programme

Many respondents suggested that no major changes are necessary but rather **current priorities should be reinforced**. Another suggestion would be that sustainable development be added as a transversal priority which would mean that it would take into consideration the social, environmental and economic dimensions altogether and push to work taking into consideration the impact on the three dimensions while working on projects at local, national, and EU levels.

The next programme should also make sure to include **provisions on how to address unexpected changes and sudden crises** (social, environmental, economic or geo-political) and how to provide more **sustainable choices of travel** to learners. The answers provided on more specific areas of attention echoed the results from the previous report where **social inclusion, environmental topics, cross-sector cooperation and digitalisation** were among the strongest areas of focus.

Respondents mentioned subtopics of the different priorities as in need for further attention. One of the areas underlined was **democracy and active citizenship** (e.g. Global citizenship education), fight against populism and critical thinking, peace education, intercultural learning, considering that these elements have not been as strongly considered as the twin transitions for now, and considering the raise in anti-democratic sentiments across the EU. On the same line it is important to continue the work around **recognition** of volunteering and civic engagement activities and overall **validation** of non-formal learning.

Within the green and digital priorities, respondents hoped for more attention to **climate change, biodiversity and ecological issues**, as well as to **emerging technologies and connections to mental health**. Addressing skills shortages and **access to training opportunities** (including micro-credentials) is another key area to provide further support. **Social inclusion** and reducing inequalities were also highlighted including **digital** and economic, **youth** and **non-formal education**, and financial and health literacy and wellbeing. The last two include more focus on mental health and prevention in general, especially in healthy lifestyle promotion. The social inclusion focus also should cover gender equality, social justice, migrant education and sexual education. Other areas to be touched upon which are key to improve education and training systems and develop flexible learning pathways are **learner-centred methodologies**

(e.g. assessment as support, participatory methodologies) and holistic and development-oriented education as well as **the role of educators** and other teaching staff.

Organisations also highlighted the need for a thriving **civic space** with further support to NGOs through operating grants as well as fostering **cross-sectoral cooperation** among formal, non-formal and informal learning representatives and other stakeholders (not just EU level but also at regional and local level) and capacity building (including in 3rd countries). When it comes to specific regions, organisations working in the mediterranean region face a considerable barrier due to budgetary reductions which hinder Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. Moreover, the budget available for other regions (e.g. Region 7a -Middle East) does not include any structural support that would allow for crucial systemic reforms.

Structure of the programme

As with the previous editions, respondents appear rather satisfied with the structure. Organisations highlighted that they would maintain the possibility of applying to NAs and to the EACEA. In terms of what can be improved about the structure, some organisations suggested that steps can be taken to better balance the budget among different sectors. The **budget** needs to increase to provide support to a bigger share of organisations and avoid high competition levels where either only more experienced organisations or the so called “project machines” can benefit. Respondents explained that at the moment KA2 calls can be too narrow, do not provide attractive funding and do not reflect enough the needs of the fields.

The structure should also allow for **cross-sectoral initiatives** (also mentioned in the previous report) that can build upon existing projects and materials which would ensure for more efficient spending of the Erasmus+ budget and move away from working in silos. Some other ideas included allowing more content development for KA1 and more learner mobility in KA2 and rethinking the subdivision of KA2 (as right now the calls comprise heterogeneous objectives). More opportunities for **regranting** and bigger umbrella organisations to act as intermediaries to real grassroots organisations should also be explored. Similarly, grants for intermediaries could be an option for sport organisations like in other sectors (e.g. culture/youth).

In line with the previous report, respondents suggested more **flexibility and transversality**. For example, given the different sectors in education and training, the lines between adult education and vocational education can be blurred, meaning that it is hard for some

organisations to choose one specific call. So addressing both should be possible and the focus should be on ensuring learners are at the centre of the proposal. It was suggested that smaller grants with less bureaucracy could be set up with wider geographical reach and having as a starting point the learner rather than the policy field. This could be made possible if EU networks are able to apply for cooperation partnerships under multiple sectors.

Respondents suggested that **civil society organisations should be more involved in consultations around the programme's structure**. There were also some calls for **simplifications** (echoing the calls in the last report), for having fewer subsections and sub key-actions and **more spaces for non-formal and informal education**. Moreover, the **sport** sector should be placed on an equal footing with the others and receive operating grants as well. Organisations also offered a reflection around KA3 which was conceived as support for collaboration among relevant organisations and ministries to apply changes and meet needs identified within KA1 and KA2 projects. However, it was felt that the logic of upscaling pilot initiatives from KA1 and KA2 towards a KA3 policy experimentation project has been lost, with the different KAs being separated from each other and not used to structurally tackle identified challenges or test innovative approaches.

Potential changes for the future programme: new initiatives/actions of the European Commission

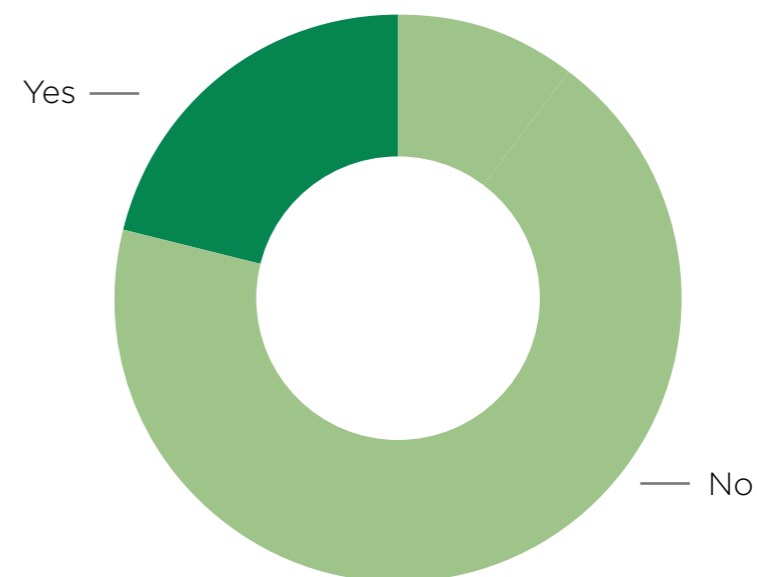
When reflecting on new initiatives, respondents were worried that these would lead to more **pressures on an already limited budget**. Respondents were very concerned about the possibilities of cuts applied to the budget of the programme due to the **adoption of financial rules that encourage austerity** in Member States. This situation is worrisome since the number of funded proposals are supposed to increase; meaning there will be less budget to be distributed. Hindering the opportunities for cooperation and partnerships which provide support and capacity building for grassroots organisations.

Organisations working on adult education noted a tendency of new actions to focus strongly on employment-related learning while taking attention away from other needed areas (sustainability, democracy, active citizenship, etc.) which were described in the New European Agenda for Adult Learning. Respondents underlined that this tendency will affect the capacity of adult education institutions to provide **holistic learning opportunities** needed for the green and digital transitions. The new actions and initiatives should avoid pigeonholing certain organisations into meeting objectives of the **Skills Agenda** while others into meeting objectives of the **EEA**. The goal would be for **both overarching strategies to complement each other**, and allow for projects that do not silo them.

Financial support

The nearly doubling of Erasmus+ funding was presented as a huge victory for the sector, considering that organisations were already facing issues with inflation coming from the previous programming period, which was then further exacerbated by Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine. Unsurprisingly, **77,78% of respondents consider the overall financial support of the current programme for the different KAs as insufficient to meet its objectives**. This situation is concerning as recently Member States decided to maintain financial rules which has proven to be ill equipped to deal with the massive investment needed in education and training, meaning that while some flexibility is allowed now the **threat of increasing budget constraints** for key sectors such as education has very much increased; despite Erasmus+ showcased far and wide as the flagship programme of the EU - through which EU values are strengthened across Member States.

«Do you think the overall financial support for the Erasmus+ programme is sufficient to meet its objectives?»



Survey respondents underlined the **need to raise the overall budget for education and training and the lump sum funding per project**. Decision makers acknowledge the power and value of the Erasmus+ programme, providing political support to it, but it needs to translate

also to financial support. More specifically more support was called for policy reform and capacity building projects as well as on cooperation with third countries. As it was hinted in previous questions, more adequate financial support is needed to tackle matters of inclusion, accessibility, inflation or crises that lead to unexpected changes and costs.

The Erasmus+ budgetary increase for the period 2021-2027 was recognised, though respondents felt that the amount of projects that are co-financed also increased. This leads to resource-challenged organisations having to contribute more than initially planned (or possible) to deliver quality outputs. The **increase in funding** should be approached also taking into account the **diversity of stakeholders and organisations representing different sectors**. While some sectors have developed their capacity regarding working at EU level, for other sectors building EU consortia poses more challenges which might lead to giving preference over sources of funding with more simplified application processes adapted to their capacities.

Synergies with other programmes

In line with the survey's previous editions, **most respondents (88,89%) consider that the Erasmus+ programme would benefit from synergies with other EU programmes.**

We also enquired about which programmes would be the better suited ones as well as the rationale behind it. **Horizon Europe, ESF+** (the two most highlighted also in the previous education of the report) and **CERV** were among the most mentioned. These programmes were followed by **LIFE, AMIF, Creative Europe, MSCA, NDICI, COSME and Interreg** as well as the **Recovery and Resilience Plans** and the **New European Bauhaus**. Connecting with these programmes will support synergies in fields such as environment and sustainability, digital transition, democratic participation and innovation and research. A key area for advocacy will be to underline the importance of these synergies ahead of the negotiations for the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework. Making strong connections among these different programmes can ensure a sustainable legacy of Erasmus+ funded projects and avoid duplications. The absence of references to ERDF and the TSI show that applications to the programme are still not sufficiently familiar with all the available support, which requires further communication and synergies to be created by the EU institutions.

Organisations mentioned **European Education Area** initiatives such as **European University Alliances**. For some organisations the international dimension of Erasmus+ means that

synergies with other programmes of academic cooperation are crucial to accelerate the internationalisation processes of universities in third countries. On the side of the **Skills Agenda**, improving the interlinkages with the **Pact for Skills** is needed and currently not exploited enough within specific Erasmus+ KAs as well as other related programmes.

Erasmus+ could also look into synergies with **Child Rights** programmes such as **Child Guarantee** and collaboration with DG EMPL and DG JUST on Child Rights. This would strengthen the focus on ECEC, which, for the moment, is neglected in the overall lifelong learning approach. The **ESF+** especially would be important to make the connections from the EU to national and regional levels (e.g. funds managed by DG REGIO) as well as the connections between the European Education Area and the European Pillar of Social Rights (principle 1).

Some organisations reflected upon the fact that while synergies with other programmes would be beneficial, the **Erasmus+ programme should also foster more synergies among its own sub-sections**. At the same time, this approach should lead to expansion and upscaling of current Erasmus+ projects that were identified as good practices to maximise the impact that the programme has in Member States' education and training systems.

They also noted that **in order to build evidence for more hands-on Erasmus+ projects, closer synergies with Horizon Europe would be key**. It is important for organisations working with Erasmus+ to be aware of the research being carried out on the topics of education and training and vice versa, with Horizon benefitting from the innovations reached through Erasmus+. A more seamless connection between these two programmes would **boost and translate innovation** happening in education and training systems and spread it to different spheres: different sectors, types and levels of education and training.

Similarly, synergies with other programmes can be built by identifying these key areas where different programmes can support each other (e.g. HADEA with **EU4Health** working together on health literacy and INTPA with **DEAR** on global and development education). Another area where **synergies should be explored is with funds at national/regional level and other international opportunities**.

Synergies with the European Education Area

On the same lines as the section on the interlinkages between the Erasmus+ programme and the European Education Area strategy, we enquired about looking for further synergies between the two. Unsurprisingly, the majority of respondents (75%) said it would be very much beneficial to look for closer synergies. Nevertheless, **synergies were supported as long as they did not increase bureaucracy**. Some organisations suggested that while Erasmus+ needs to take into account and be more attuned to the European Education Area, it could be explored how the experiences and needs identified in Erasmus+ can support the design of priorities in the European Education Area.



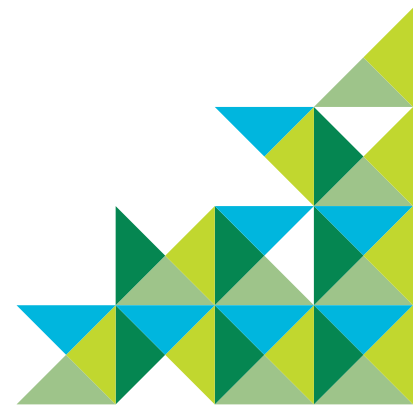
CONCLUSIONS

As signalled in the introduction the aim of the survey was to analyse the experience of EU-wide networks of civil society organisations representing different programme beneficiaries in the current Erasmus+ programme period (2021-2027). Being at the midpoint of the current programme allowed LLLP to obtain in depth data and sound perspectives from beneficiaries as they could take stock of 3 years of the new Erasmus+ programme and provide keen comparisons with previous iterations.

Overall, the general assessment is that there have been welcome improvements in the programme with the lump sum format being particularly appreciated as well as the key priorities of the programme being recognised as important to maintain and strengthen. Nevertheless, it is to be noted that many issues previously reported in editions before 2021 remain which shed light on the fact that these issues cannot be fully attached to the difficult period brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Therefore, the Lifelong Learning Platform calls on policy and decision makers to take into consideration the recommendations from civil society organisations and networks on what is working well, what could be improved and what is missing in the current programme. By doing so, the European Union can better work in the second half of this programming period towards the goals set forth by the Programme and better prepare for the programme's future.

The Lifelong Learning Platform remains committed to support the EU institutions in this task and will continue to follow up on this report and enrich these reflections for the future programme with its members and other relevant stakeholders in education and training.





LIFELONG LEARNING PLATFORM

EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY FOR EDUCATION

The Lifelong Learning Platform is an umbrella association that gathers 42 European organisations active in the field of education and training, coming from all EU Member States and beyond. Currently these networks represent more than 50 000 educational institutions (schools, universities, adult education and youth centres, etc.) or associations (involving students, teachers and trainers, parents, HRD professionals, etc.) covering all sectors of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Their members reach out to several millions of beneficiaries.

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