EUCIS-LLL Erasmus+ assessment

First phase – ownership of the programme and applications

On 28 May 2014 EUCIS-LLL launched a broad public consultation on the new Erasmus+ programme. On 25 June 2014, we received 52 responses from which we based this interim report. The consultation will be closed on 27 June and the current analysis will be updated and discussed with EUCIS-LLL members and partners, the European Commission and the EACEA on 30 June 2014.
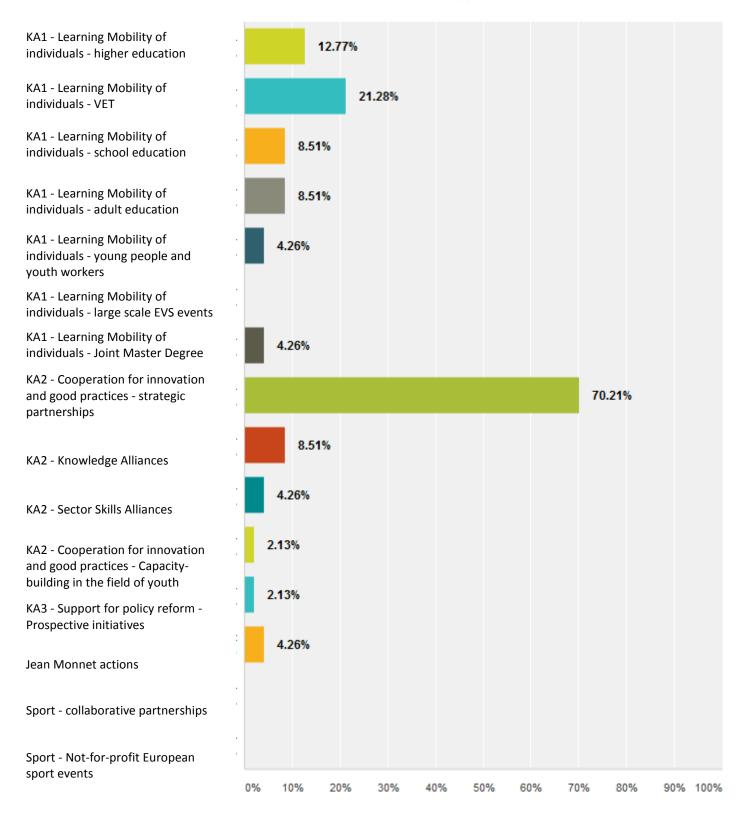
PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

41% of respondents are educational institutions, followed by European NGOs (17%) and national NGOs (13%). No replies have been received from the sport and youth sector although some comments were made on the youth actions and on the youth national agencies.

Applications for Erasmus+ actions have been mostly submitted in France (18%) and Belgium (16%) followed by the Netherlands and Italy (8%) and by the UK, Germany, Cyprus and Portugal (6%). 14% of respondents submitted to the Executive Agency for centralised calls or civil society cooperation.

The Erasmus+ actions that have received the most responses are by far the Key actions 2 – Strategic Partnerships with 70%, followed by Key actions 1 – Learning mobility at 59% (13% for higher education, 21% for VET, 8% for school education and 8% for adult education).

For which Erasmus+ action did you apply?

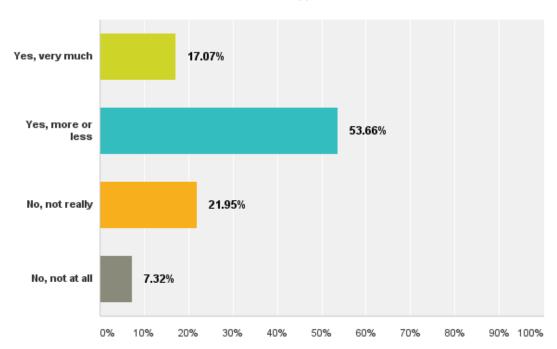| Action	Percentage
KA1 - Learning Mobility of individuals - higher education	12.77%
KA1 - Learning Mobility of individuals - VET	21.28%
KA1 - Learning Mobility of individuals - school education	8.51%
KA1 - Learning Mobility of individuals - adult education	8.51%
KA1 - Learning Mobility of individuals - young people and youth workers	4.26%
KA1 - Learning Mobility of individuals - large scale EVS events	
KA1 - Learning Mobility of individuals - Joint Master Degree	4.26%
KA2 - Cooperation for innovation and good practices - strategic partnerships	70.21%
KA2 - Knowledge Alliances	8.51%
KA2 - Sector Skills Alliances	4.26%
KA2 - Cooperation for innovation and good practices - Capacity-building in the field of youth	2.13%
KA3 - Support for policy reform - Prospective initiatives	2.13%
Jean Monnet actions	4.26%
Sport - collaborative partnerships	
Sport - Not-for-profit European sport events	

GETTING TO KNOW ERASMUS+

1)   New architecture of Erasmus+

Q8 Are you satisfied with the simplifed architecture of Erasmus+? (division between Key Action 1, 2 and 3 instead of sectors).

Answered: 41   Skipped: 5

Response	Percentage
Yes, very much	17.07%
Yes, more or less	53.66%
No, not really	21.95%
No, not at all	7.32%

Respondents seem **more or less satisfied** by the new architecture of the Erasmus+ programme (54%). Those who are not really satisfied or not at all satisfied mostly complain about the fact that **a division only by sectors was much more user-friendly** and more tailored to beneficiaries' needs. Besides, respondents regret **that the will of the European Parliament to preserve sectors' names has been ignored** (i.e. on DG EAC's programme webpage).
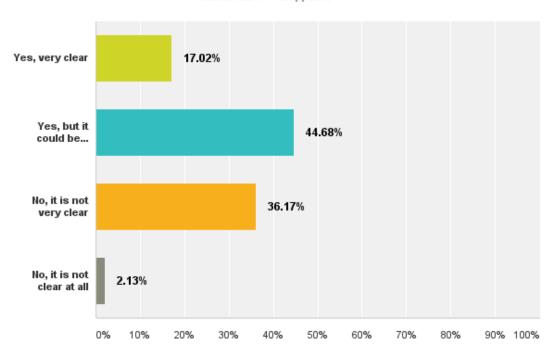
Generally, respondents felt that the new architecture **excluded some organisations** (i.e. the ones having a lifelong learning scope), **spoiled some sectors** (i.e. adult learners should have opportunities for placements, VET providers that cannot apply for training fees) and **handicapped medium-sized or large consortiums** (Strategic Partnerships) with a limitation of 10 partners maximum and almost no support for coordination (lump sum of 500 EUR per coordinator regardless of the country).

Besides, simplified architecture **does not entail simplified application forms**. Many comments point out the fact that it may be more readable but not less complex (i.e. doing an application covering all sectors). For instance respondents said that application forms for KA1 were very complex for small organisations only doing one staff mobility and that it was difficult to plan ahead exactly when/where the mobility would take place.

2) Clarity and user-friendliness

Q4 Is the Erasmus+ programme guide user-friendly and clear enough?

Answered: 47   Skipped: 5

Due to the transition period, **most respondents say the programme lacks clarity** (83%). Although the new architecture seems to have been easily accepted by applicants, a lot of information had to be assimilated in a short period of time and **mostly in English**, through a very dense users' guide**, which has been mentioned as a barrier**. Many suggestions were made to elaborate a more user-friendly guide, for instance by **separating the guide by actions or even by activity**, avoiding splitting information between the main body and the annexes and making sure each action is structured in the same way.
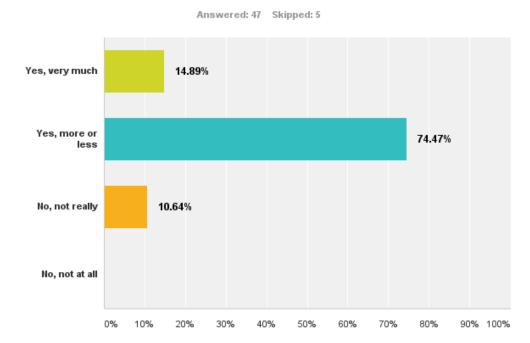
Generally, the action's guidelines were perceived as **a "continuous guessing"** from political priorities to concrete instructions, spread among different sources of information that were often judged too generic and too dense. Information in different languages (EN/FR) sometimes led to divergent interpretations. Many **frustrations have especially been expressed on intellectual outputs (KA2)**: applicants were mostly confused about what should be considered as an output or not. They found those outputs were hindering a global vision of the project in particular for evaluators when trying to understand the work plan. National Agencies themselves did not always seem to know better and it was hard for respondents to get coherent responses from different national agencies even in the same country. People noted that many relevant activities could be funded even though they are not concretised by tangible intellectual outputs as they are currently understood (courses, booklets…). Furthermore dividing intellectual outputs into different activities implied to fill in a very complicated budget form with thousands of clicks in order to fill in the staff contributions for each sub-activity.

One respondent also regretted that **training activities in KA2** were only limited to the partners' staff instead of being open to other practitioners who could benefit from the project as it was the case in the LLP. Furthermore this was not clearly explained in the guide.

Applicants had to deal with difficulties regarding **financial aspects** as well. New lump sums systems were particularly confusing to understand. One respondent was particularly dazed to find by chance a 100 pages document on "*The use of lump sums, the reimbursement on the basis of unit costs and the flat-rate financing under the "Erasmus+ Programme"* (December 2013) on DG EAC website, which was never mentioned in the communications of the Commission or Agencies. In terms of transparency, it was noted that webpages should clearly state amounts available for a year and approximate number of projects funded per national agency.

3)   Relevance of objectives and important features

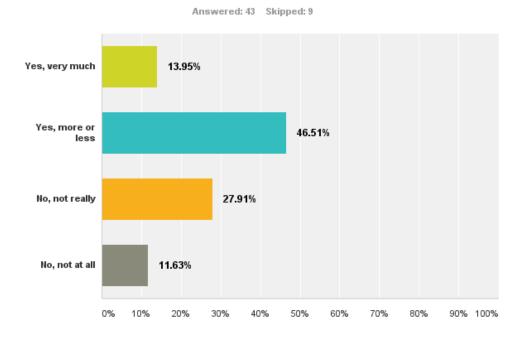### Q6 Are the objectives and important features of the Erasmus+ programme adapted to your reality?

Answered: 47   Skipped: 5

Yes, very much	14.89%
Yes, more or less	74.47%
No, not really	10.64%
No, not at all	

89% of respondents think the programme is very much or more or less adapted to their reality with various and wide objectives covering many sectors and responding to current societal needs. However **some sectors do feel they have been spoiled compared to others** (i.e. adult education VS higher education and VET that have the sector skills and the knowledge alliances while Grundtvig networks have disappeared), including in terms of formulation of objectives (adult education reduced to basic skills), which stands in their way to work on larger scale and innovative topics (e.g. active aging, environment education). Some respondents also feel indeed sometimes that a **too strong emphasis is put on very specific issues**, such as entrepreneurship; some are also tired about objectives that are high in the EU agenda but do not correspond to the reality of some sectors, i.e. growth and jobs for school education or bringing closer the worlds of education and work, which seems sometimes to be the only opportunity left for building networks of cooperation.

4) Differences between new Key Actions/activities and clarity

A large majority of respondents think that differences between Key Actions and activities are very clear, even though the compilation of action names and sector names may be confusing and choosing the appropriate strand can be challenging. It was also pointed out that although it might be crystal clear for applicants used to EU jargon, it may **not be so easy to acknowledge by new-comers to the programme**. Some respondents have also expressed hesitations on the balance between Actions, as they believe there is **too much focus on mobility** compared to partnerships that are in their opinion more relevant to foster sustainable cooperation across the continent.

5) Comparison with the Lifelong Learning Programme

Q11 **Compared to the previous Lifelong Learning programme, do you think Erasmus+ is innovative? (new actions, possibility to work with other sectors...)**

Answered: 43   Skipped: 9

Yes, very much	13.95%
Yes, more or less	46.51%
No, not really	27.91%
No, not at all	11.63%

60% of respondents believe Erasmus+ is very much/more or less innovative compared to the previous Lifelong Learning Programme while **more than one third (40%) think that the programme is not really/not at all innovative.** Compared to the LLP, people would have liked to keep especially **actions clearly focused on languages**. Other regretted actions such as **Roma multilateral projects, study visits** that were crucial to develop partnerships and **Grundtvig in-service trainings**.

Except for the new name and forms respondent felt that the programme is not so innovative and that genuine innovation would not necessarily mean new actions but **including new priorities**, such as educational methodologies, innovative research and ICT, and tackling traditional issues such as gender equality with truly innovative projects. Innovation would also be welcome in a greater

simplification of application procedures. Strategic partnerships and Erasmus placements appear more complicated now then with the LLP.

6) Dissemination and exploitation: improved with Erasmus+?

When asked about improvement of dissemination and exploitation in Erasmus+ (notably through Erasmus+ dissemination platform, EPALE, eTwinning…), **respondents do hope new platforms in place will contribute to greater visibility, synergies and improved partner search**. They also hope all former projects will be included in these databases not to reinvent the wheel after so many years of quality initiatives; people even wish they could contribute themselves to contents. They also expect those platforms to be less restrictive (i.e. participating in eTwinning even though you are not a teacher). However, people think this database should be carefully handled in order not to only expose usual suspects looking for partners.

Besides, according to respondents **National Agencies should be obliged to support dissemination of projects** at national level as they have resources to do so, instead of making organisations strive to promote each project – especially since the **new emphasis on dissemination and exploitation does not match extra levels of funding in the new actions**. Respondents regret that there is **no specific budget anymore for dissemination and exploitation** of results. Although applicants are asked to broadly disseminate the outcomes of their projects, there is no specific funding for that. Some propose "follow-up actions" to continue successful projects. **More budget and guidance is essential.**

As for the **disappearance of Grundtvig/Comenius catalogues**, respondents believe it is a disaster, as each training provider will now have to promote its courses by its own means (entailing a lot of spamming…) and information is not transparent anymore. Besides, the catalogues were guaranteeing a certain level of professionalism in the courses; quality is not ensured anymore.

APPLYING FOR ERASMUS+

7) Building consortia and eligibility criteria for applicants

In a general way **respondents are satisfied with the eligibility criteria of the different calls**, even though people think more examples should be provided sometimes, as it is not always clear who can be involved or not. When concerns are expressed, it is in particular on the fact that **individuals cannot apply anymore, which may hinder participation** as their potential sending organisation/legal responsible may not judge the mobility relevant. Confusion seems also to remain for **umbrella organisations that should be able to apply for their members** in some cases, which was not clearly explained. One respondent complained that **voluntary-based organisations were no longer eligible in Spain as adult education providers** whereas they were eligible under the Lifelong Learning Programme.

As for building consortia, respondents did not have particular problems but mostly because they were used to apply for projects and to work with traditional partners. Some people regret that relevant partners had to be excluded sometimes as for instance **Strategic Partnerships** are not designed for medium-sized or large consortia (e.g. filling in up to 200 lines in the budget staff section when you have 10 partners and 500 EUR for coordination whether you have 3 or 10 partners). Others evoke new funding rules that repel potential partners. Building a quality consortium for **Sector Skills Alliances** also seemed complicated due to delays in the publication of calls combined to

very high standards. People in general would have liked **more infodays and occasions to network** as well as a **database of participants** (some have come up with ad hoc networking channels themselves, such as LinkedIn), that will most likely be developed through the Erasmus+ dissemination platform.

8)   Mobility practicalities

A recurrent element was the **length of KA1 mobility projects**; one or two year-projects do not really make sense and respondents found very hard to plan mobility actions so much in advance. Some respondents would have liked to be able to **combine work placement and mobility in an educational institution**. Some complained that the travel costs in KA1 were unrealistic for those living in remote areas, which was discriminatory for organisations located in those areas. Others that differences between sectors were not clear enough (e.g. duration of the stay). Overall, some believe that mobility criteria are not clearly defined (budget, maximum persons, number of mobility per year…).
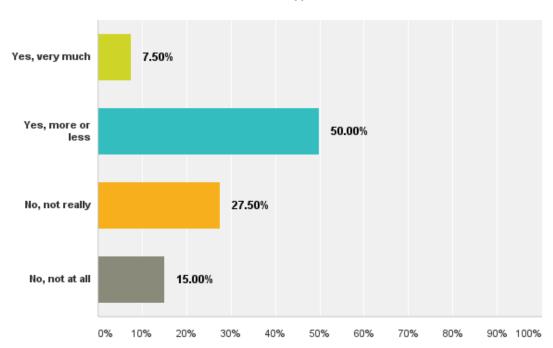
9)   Deadlines

Of course due to the transition period many beneficiaries complained about the **lack of time** between the publication of the calls/users' guide translation and deadlines, which hindered quality applications and good familiarisation with eForms (especially with technical difficulties). They hope for a better timeline next year, also **avoiding falling during Easter holidays** (which entailed many complications). People are especially worried that the situation will be the same with the ET2020 review, Parliament and Commission elections, etc. They nevertheless appreciated the **time laps given between KA1 and KA2** deadlines for those working on several applications, which should be kept. Many respondents found unprofessional and unfair the **postponing of the KA1 deadline** though. People also would like to see more dates made public, such as the **duration of the selection period and the precise dates for selection results** in a transparent and fair process. It is very important for beneficiaries in order to foresee different organisational matters such as human and financial resources.

10) User-friendliness and coherence of eForms

Q18 Were the application forms user-friendly and coherent enough?

Answered: 40   Skipped: 12

Only 57,5% of respondents found eForms very or more or less easy to handle and 42,5% not really or not at all user friendly. People generally found them even **more complex than the LLP** (some even said it reminded them of Socrates forms, or that they are the worst they have ever seen!), not enabling applicants and evaluators to have a clear overview of the project idea (i.e. fractioning intellectual outputs in actions). All the comments mention that the forms were highly time-consuming. The **PDF form seems to be very heavy** (no possibility to work directly on the file itself), **unfriendly and time-consuming**, **not suitable for collaboration with partners** during the project preparation (i.e. no track changes allowed, no possibility to work in the same time on the file) and sometimes not even compatible with computer settings (crashes with the firewalls).

As for eForms contents, beneficiaries think the **different parts of the eForms could be connected more logically** especially for KA1. Participants had a feeling of **redundancy** replying to the questions (i.e. management section, description of activities/intellectual outputs) and were quite disconcerted by some questions (i.e. activities in preparation of the project) and it seemed quite hard to guess what was expected. Many would like to see **more flexibility in order not to denature the project idea**, including by being able to put images or charts, or simply highlighting text. One precise point has been particularly annoying for applicants: being obliged to multiply the clicks for the "activities" and "intellectual outputs" each time they want to involve their whole consortium (i.e. 400 clicks for 10 partners x 4 staff categories x 10 intellectual outcomes!).

11)   Reduction of administrative burden

Respondents still think administrative barriers hinder participation, especially from small organisations and SMEs. **Language issues** have been in particular handicapping in this transition period where translations of key documents were not available in time in all EU languages.

People have a **general positive feedback on the new PIC system**, even though adapting to it has led to difficulties (increased workload for the management team to guide partners, difficulties to coordinate partners' registration, adaptation of organisations not familiar at all with this process) and that the ECAS system has shown some dysfunctions (e.g. in the legal status of the NGO partners who appeared as "other" in the participants' portal instead of "non-for-profit" which was stressful because this was an eligibility criteria). The French Agency has apparently released very useful guidelines, while the EACEA ones were "terrible" (too long and dense; lack of coherence with the annexes at the end, etc.). However respondents think it is **truly an innovation** and even wished the PIC system to be expanded, for instance providing also automatic information for other parts of the eForm.

As for documents to upload, the **signing procedure should be more permissive**. The directors or executive mangers should be able for instance to sign for their presidents /or legal representative. Besides, it should be made very clear which documents are compulsory or not. Some of them did not seem compulsory but agencies asked for them after the application.

12)   Budget and lump sum system

Among the practical barriers identified for mobility actions, respondents found that **travel costs lump sums** were unrealistic as they do not genuinely take into account beneficiaries living in **remote countries** (Turkey, Cyprus, Iceland) and **areas** (rural versus capitals), which they found really **discriminatory**. Besides, people do not understand why there is a fixed ceiling for travel costs regardless of the length of the project and of destination countries' standards of living, which may also exclude richest countries from the partnership. People also complained that travels within a same country to attend a project meeting were not covered, while distances could sometimes be longer than from one country to another.

Lump sums are generally seen as an easier way to make calculations even though their implementation was not accompanied with sufficient guidelines during the transition period. People think this is **really innovative but there is still a lot to do to improve the proposed system**. Respondents lost a lot of time trying to gather coherent and complete information from various sources. **Reporting guidelines** in particular were not clear, which led to uncertainty on what exactly was going to be eligible (especially management, intellectual outputs and multiplier events), and how this eligibility will have to be shown in the financial reports. The lack of information regarding the financial reporting is indeed seen as very detrimental to the programme and causes many uncertainties; it made the project application process very difficult as it meant building a budget and financial rules for the consortium of partners without knowing what will be expected at the end.

The sums and calculations were easy to implement on the e-form. However, Agencies should **provide applications with an Excel template in order to build a provisional budget**. Indeed, the eForm budget could only be inserted once all activities and members taking part in those activities were indicated in the e-form, which led to some difficulties in knowing exactly how the budget calculations were going to be made. The French Agency provided an online budget tool, which unfortunately did not allow for training activities (in the case of strategic partnerships). This tool was

handy for quick calculations, but the results could not be saved in a user-friendly format. Furthermore using a eForm for medium or large-scale consortia was seen as strongly unfriendly.

The new division of budget lines was not always found relevant (especially for intellectual outputs), and **beneficiaries were numerous to complain about far insufficient and unrealistic amounts**, especially penalising ambitious projects with numerous mobilities. The difference between "requested grant" and "calculated grant" was not always well understood.

The allocation of funds for **project management** in particular was judged as not sufficient (especially if it includes dissemination and quality assurance), arbitrary and difficult to implement. Furthermore allocating the same amount - 500 EUR/month for the coordinator - in Bulgaria or in Sweden for example appears to be unfair, as it does not correspond to the standards of living. A differenced calculation was made for staff categories and participants do not understand why it was not implemented for the coordination budget line as well. Finally the automatic allocation per partners and up to 10 partners seemed very low for big consortia, and clearly did not allow for a lot of staff time (as the costs also have to cover communications expenses, printing etc…). **In general staff costs lump sums are also seen as unrealistic**.

People appreciate the **flexibility in lump sums allocations** (i.e. if a partner does not use the entire lump sum at its disposal for say a project meeting mobility, the remaining funds could be allocated to another partner).
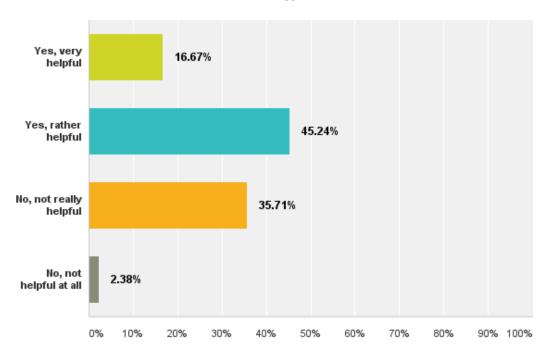
Again, the fact that **study visits** are not funded in seen as a setback.

Finally, it should clearly be stated which amounts are available for a year and the approximate number of projects that will be funded. It seems that some applicants have reduced their budget (and therefore the quality of their project) to get selected, sometimes based on National Agencies advice.

13) Cooperation with National Agencies

Q22 In general, do you feel National Agencies were available and helpful?

Answered: 42   Skipped: 10

Response	Percentage
Yes, very helpful	16.67%
Yes, rather helpful	45.24%
No, not really helpful	35.71%
No, not helpful at all	2.38%

Approximately 62% of respondents found their agency very or rather helpful while 38% of respondents did not find their National Agency (NA) really helpful or not at all. Applicants feel Agencies vary very much in quality, support and understanding (depending also on the number of years since the country has become a partner country, the oldest having the most expertise) and that national priorities still prevail in reality. They often had to contact the EACEA or National Agencies (and sometimes many times) to get more information and despite a general satisfaction about their availability and willingness to help (i.e. information sessions), respondents felt much contradictory information has been spread and that most of the time, Agencies were not able to provide them with clear and concrete elements of answer (no added value compared to guidelines). People consequently fear there will be different political approaches from one NA to another. Respondents in general felt irritated by the launch of the new programme without full availability of transparent and coherent information from bodies in charge.
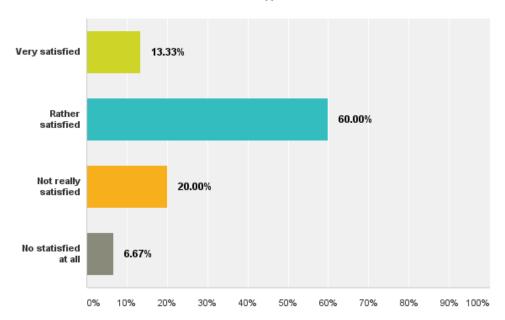
People feel decentralisation was a mistake (duplicated projects, come back to national agendas and priorities…) and trust more the EACEA and central level to manage projects in a transparent way and provide relevant information, while Agencies were seen as not really well informed (especially on finance) and giving contradictory information, even between Agencies of the same country. They are seen as competent evaluators but as lacking pedagogy, and respondents fear they will not be up to the expertise of the EACEA. Respondents would have liked more information seminars.

EUROPEAN NGOs AND ERASMUS+

14) Cooperation with Belgian Agencies

Q24 Overall, how would you describe your relation to Belgian agencies? Were you satisfied with the cooperation with them? (English proficiency, openness and neutrality towards European NGOs, awareness of European NGOs specificities)

Answered: 15   Skipped: 37

Category	Percentage
Very satisfied	13.33%
Rather satisfied	60.00%
Not really satisfied	20.00%
No statisfied at all	6.67%

73% of respondents from European NGOs were satisfied of the cooperation with Belgian agencies, which is very satisfactory. Both the French-speaking and Flemish Agencies were approachable and judged better than what the EACEA has been in the past. Some NGOs had already collaborated in the past with Belgian NAs, which proved to be sometimes an advantage (good personal relations) or a disadvantage (less chances to be selected after having won previous projects). Still, some people in the agencies do not think they should deal with European NGOs as this is not their primary target group and have not received extra funding for that purpose. Some NGOs strategically decided to apply in another Agency to give more chances to their project and delegate the coordination to their partner in the country of application. Some also gave up on good project ideas because it would have been too big for Belgium.

15) Civil society cooperation: timeline

Due to the transition period, people felt the timeline was very short for applications and the **whole delay of the call publication** (initially September, finally January…) **and selection process caused many damages and a lot of stress**. NGOs basically worked half a year without any funding, which was especially a problem in terms of Human resources management, project preparation

management and on cash flow. Besides, the March **deadline** was exactly the period of the annual report submission for NGOs already receiving an EU grant and also close to the deadline for other projects (KA1, KA2). Also, the obligation to have all the organisation members registered with a **PIC number** was a challenge. Deadlines for selection results were also very vague and should be precise and transparent for obvious financial and human management reasons. Besides, **selection results should be harmonised within DG EAC**; the culture sector for instance has a very clear overview of the results and even some statistics available.

16) Civil society cooperation: relevance of objectives and length

Beneficiaries would prefer to work with a **three-years framework agreement or even more to have a real, sustainable systemic impact** with a long-term vision and a structuration of the field; it would also allow a better planning.

Objectives were seen as clear, broad enough and relevant to the current context, even though too focused on short-term challenges and **forgetting some sectors such as adult education**.

17) Civil society cooperation: eligibility of activities/beneficiaries

Some applicants felt that the **scope of eligible activities have been narrowed**. As for **eligible applicants, NGOs regret that the grant only covers EU residents travel and subsistence costs,** while some of them cover a broader geographic scope. This provision can hinder for instance democratic elections within organisations since having EU residents as part of the Board is currently more cost-effective.

18) Civil society cooperation: application form user-friendliness

Applicants felt the application form was user-friendly **and less redundant than before, even though there were still a few questions overlapping** (two questions were on the relevance of activities compared to the call objectives). Besides, the work programme with activities should be placed after the general questions. **A commented application form would help** (like for decentralised actions), as fully understanding questions without guidelines was not an easy task (i.e. meaning of "statutory members").

While it is positive to be able to develop and explain extensively the project proposal, they thought that the Form did **not provide enough space to describe in details how activities would really match objectives**, especially since some evaluations reproached some applications to have too vague activities while no guidelines were given on the level of details requested and the number of words was limited. There should also be the **possibility to include pictures, charts and links or simply to highlight some elements**. The information about the **additional documents** was confusing, a clear checklist should be provided.

19) Civil society cooperation: budget, co-funding, lump-sum

The **amount of the grant seemed realistic** for applicants and was sometimes increased for some of them, but is still judged **desperately low and frustrating compared to other sectors** (youth, citizenship, social affairs and culture).

The **co-funding rules were not clear especially as regards the in-kind contribution** that did not have any repercussion on the budget. The Commission had announced that contributions in kind / volunteer time would count as contribution in the applicants' budget and the first budget template allowed it. However another rule in the call cancelled this provision and a second budget template form was issued by the EACEA a few weeks before the deadline. This created a lot of confusion for participants who did not know until the last minute if contributions in kind were accepted or not. Some respondents outlined that **contributions in kind should be accepted**, as for a lot of organisations, they represent an important part of their finances (i.e. volunteer work), and as such should be formally recognised and valorised by the European Commission. One way would be to reduce the amount of co-financing (eligible costs) and ask for a percentage of contributions in kind (ineligible costs) based on a calculation to be agreed upon. Other respondents suggested reducing the co-funding rate to 10% giving the example of the Social Platform in the Europe for Citizens programme. The adoption of a **lump sum system** was also mentioned as a better solution by many respondents but some expressed concerns especially as regards staff costs calculation (e.g. a lump sum system that is based on staff days would not be feasible for many organisations that manage both operating grants and projects.

In the future, beneficiaries would also like **lighter reporting procedures** and a **closer cooperation with the EACEA**. The one-day meeting that was organised before 2011 with beneficiaries was really useful (giving tips, building trust…).