

# EU MONITOR

## The Size of Erasmus+ Will Determine the EU Ambition in Education

Karel Barták

- **Education is an area in which the EU holds nearly zero competences as it falls fully under the subsidiarity principle. The EU cannot impose or infringe upon the structure of educational systems, curricula or even teaching itself. Education is solely the purview of member states' governments. The EU does, for instance, not interfere in decisions about the duration of secondary schools or about the subjects imposed for compulsory final exams. And yet, with the Erasmus+ programme, the EU is a major player in education and influencer of the young generation.**



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The European Commission proposed back in May to more than double the budget of the programme, from 14,7 billion to 30 billion for the seven year period 2021-26.<sup>1</sup> This should not only benefit a much larger crowd of young people to study or work abroad, which is the initial purpose of Erasmus, but also enable the creation of the so called European Education Area (EEA) by 2025<sup>2</sup>, as a response of the EU to the challenging needs in skills and competences in a globalised and digitalised world. An example of the Commission being a driving force behind a political vision being gradually transformed into a political agenda in a field with extremely limited EU competence. The European parliament later proposed to increase the Erasmus budget threefold, to some 45 billion euros, which would obviously further increase its political impact.<sup>3</sup>

At this stage, there is an ongoing negotiation, the so-called trilogue, between the Council, the Parliament and the Commission, about the final shape of the legal proposal. While the Council did not substantially alter the Commission proposal, the European Parliament has come forward with a number of amendments, beyond the mentioned budgetary increase. The most important ones are to strongly increase the support for cross-border mobility of learning adults, and to widen the scope of the Erasmus Mundus scheme to cover also the PHD level.<sup>4</sup>

The Czech Republic has supported the Commission proposal from the start, being fully aware of the importance and popularity of this highly successful programme. It could also accept the above mentioned EP amendments, but not the one proposing managing the programme through delegated acts; according to the Czech Education ministry, the programme committee composed of all participating countries should stay in charge. Overall, Prague supports the more general wording proposed by the Commission, compared to the detailed formulations brought in by the EP, arguing that the new Erasmus+ will need some flexibility

and scope for adaptation during its seven year implementation.

The top level talks about the multiannual financial framework (budget) will only kick off at the December EU summit and will run in parallel, with the final Erasmus+ legal base being approved after the budget is settled, probably only in the second half of 2020. Given the ambitious EP push, it is quite probable that the final outcome will enable at least the doubling of the Erasmus budget, despite the income gap caused by Brexit.

## Erasmus Will Stay Focused on Individual Mobility and Embrace more Young People

The initial aim of the Erasmus scheme – providing the opportunity for university students to spend a semester or more in another university abroad – will be of course continued and reinforced; the Commission proposes investing some eight billion euros<sup>5</sup>, providing for mobility of more than three million students and hundreds of thousands of teachers. The focus on other categories, in particular pupils and young people in vocational education and training, will continue, with two million pupils and 1,8 VET students travelling for learning periods abroad.

The Commission has expressed the wish of having 12 million mobile cross-border learners of all categories, including the youth schemes, participating in Erasmus+ in the next programming period, which means tripling the number of mobilities while „only“ doubling the budget. The Commission has explained that the figure includes new flexible ways of being mobile, like group mobility, short-term trips and stays or the so-called ‚blended mobility‘, which is a combination of virtual exchanges, basically online, and short physical mobility. These innovations will have to

<sup>1</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_6218](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_6218)

<sup>2</sup> Council conclusions on moving towards a vision of a European Education Area OJ2018/C 195/04

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190321IPR32121/erasmus-2021-2027-more-people-to-experience-learning-exchanges-in-europe>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190321IPR32121/erasmus-2021-2027-more-people-to-experience-learning-exchanges-in-europe>

<sup>5</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_6218](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_6218)

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be explained in more detail and more clearly defined in the final regulation. It is also not clear whether the figure 12 million includes the youngsters who will be selected for short culture-oriented tourist trips across Europe, the so-called DiscoverEU activities. On the other hand, the sport coaches and staff are clearly included, as the rather limited EU sports action is now fully integrated into Erasmus+.

### Cooperation Will Remain the Other Focus

Another typical feature of the Erasmus programme, although by far not as famous as the individual mobilities, are cooperation projects between organisations and institutions in education and training, youth and sport. Nothing very new here, except the commitment of the Commission to include little projects, so called small scale partnerships. This should enable small organisations like ordinary schools, NGOs, training centres or youth clubs to present projects as leaders or partners and apply for grants. A definition of „small scale“ has, however, not been provided. The Commission promised simplification, lighter administrative procedure, less red tape and bureaucratic complications, which was immediately very well received by players across the board.<sup>6</sup> The educational institutions and organisations representing the sector are since then asking the basic question, how the Commission is planning to fulfill its promise. These organisations are familiar with the internal financial rules of the Commission, its control and audit policies, and logically have doubts about the ability of this institution to propose and above all implement lighter ways of dealing with public money without changing its financial and procurement regulations.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter includes as well „Partnerships for excellence“, the new scheme for universities and vocational training centres. The higher education part is considered to be reflecting the conclusions of the European Council in December 2018, which itself was reacting to a proposal

formulated by French president Emmanuel Macron to create 20 European universities with coordinated targets by 2024. Stemming from that, the Commission should be able to present in the near future the results of a pilot project for a „European University Network“. The provisions underlying this network's aim at achieving excellence stipulates that it should be open to every type of higher education institution in the EU, should be geographically balanced, socially inclusive and designed through a bottom-up approach. This is easier said than done, as „excellence“ is often understood as an elitist notion not necessarily open to inclusive approaches; indeed worth experimenting. A combination of funding with the future research and development programme (Horizon) is also foreseen, but further detail how to make different EU funding schemes work together is missing at this point.

Another proposed innovation is the funding foreseen for the Centres of Vocational Excellence. The Commission draws here from the experience of European Vocational Training Association (EVTA), with the intention to create cross-border links between providers of vocational training and education and companies, employment services and social partners. The project can be seen as a response to the current lack of skilled workers and professionals in many EU member states and insufficient cooperation between stakeholders in this area at national level. The Commission can propose transnational initiatives and is doing so, arguing with competitiveness and smart economic development, but not giving enough detail which would enable envisioning how the scheme would work.

### Policy development as a by-product of Erasmus with New Ambitions

The Commission strives, for the sake of clarity, to keep the Erasmus+ programme separate from the policy area. But given the subsidiarity pressure, the policy initiatives at the EU level depend directly on the importance and bulk of

<sup>6</sup> [http://illplatform.eu/ill/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Infonote\\_new-Erasmus-proposal-2018.pdf](http://illplatform.eu/ill/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Infonote_new-Erasmus-proposal-2018.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [http://illplatform.eu/ill/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Infonote\\_new-Erasmus-proposal-2018.pdf](http://illplatform.eu/ill/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Infonote_new-Erasmus-proposal-2018.pdf)



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the programme, also because there are no other means of funding them; every euro spent on education at the EU level comes from the same basket. More than 5 billion euros are foreseen for policy initiatives and coordination in the 2021-26 Erasmus budget proposal. The EP has proposed to slightly cut this amount in favour of more individual mobility.

The overarching goal here is to achieve the construction of the European Education Area by 2025, as mentioned above. The Commission has formulated its vision as follows:

„A Europe in which learning, studying and doing research would not be hampered by borders. A continent, where spending time in another Member State – to study, to learn, or to work – has become the standard and where, in addition to one's mother tongue, speaking two other languages has become the norm. A continent in which people have a strong sense of their identity as Europeans, of Europe's cultural heritage and its diversity.“<sup>8</sup>

The political chapter of the proposed legal base contains the tools and measures to be undertaken in order to achieve this noble goal. The „open method of coordination“ will continue to be exclusively used in this environment, bringing together the member states and EU institutions around a variety of commonly decided and identified topics or targets. The format can vary from expert meetings through working groups and peer counselling up to the formal Council working parties and ministerial meetings twice a year. The EU will continue to support EU-wide surveys and studies, also through the unique Eurydice network, and propose specific actions to address new policy challenges. Recognition of skills, competences and qualifications stays obviously high on the agenda, including the financing of the bodies and the activities of the Bologna process. The Bologna process itself is a good example of how the „open method of coordination“ can gradually lead to legislative harmonisation in areas where EU legislation is excluded. It is a very slow process, but can be a fruitful one at the end, without limiting the full national competence in

education, based solely on the step by step understanding that common interest is in line with national wishes.

For 2020, the policy discussions will focus on nationally adopted measures, which should lead in all EU member states to achieving a couple of commonly adopted benchmarks:<sup>9</sup>

- At least 95% of children participating in early childhood education
- Less than 15% of 15 year olds underskilled in reading, maths and science
- Rate of early school leavers aged 18-24 below 10%
- At least 40% of people aged 30-34 having some form of higher education degree
- At least 15% of adults participating in learning
- At least 20% of higher education graduates having spent some time studying abroad
- At least 6% of people aged 18-34 with a vocational qualification having spent a learning period abroad.

The number and variety of these targets demonstrate the scope of the EU political action as well as their possible impact on domestic measures. Competition to achieve these commonly decided benchmarks is one of the positive contributions of the EU cooperation in education.

While most of the work is done at national level, the EU gives a helping hand in many ways, providing financial support for meetings and peer learning, supporting international organisations and compiling statistics and surveys. For the next period, it foresees of course to maintain its network of National Agencies, which implement most of the mobility projects, but also other bodies and networks like SALTO (helping organise youth training exchanges), Erasmus Alumni network, Eurodesk dissemination network or Eurydice mentioned above, which supplies invaluable EU-wide or wider statistical support.

„Specific measures“ are supposed to be introduced to help promoters of Erasmus+ projects to apply for grants also through the European Structural and Investment Fund (ESIF), Horizon Europe and programmes relating to

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.czelo.cz/files/prezentace-pozvanky/Sophia-Eriksson-Neth-ER-seminar-Beyond-2020.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/et2020-framework\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/et2020-framework_en)

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migration, security, justice, citizenship and health. While the overlap of all these areas with education and youth is obvious, it is not clear how such combination will work in practice because of the differing rules and implementation procedures of the various EU programmes.

### A Bright Future for Erasmus

The last two benchmarks on individual mobility mentioned above could be rising substantially in the years to come, if the new regulation is adopted more or less along the lines proposed by the Commission and the EP. The Commission dismisses the frequent criticism of the Erasmus+ scheme as being too shallow, often more a pastime than a substantial learning experience. According to its surveys, employers appreciate the Erasmus experience in CVs: the Erasmus alumni double their chances of finding a job in one year after graduation and their

salaries are 25% above the average. One third of them are offered a job in companies where they start their careers as trainees.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, and perhaps even more important for Europe: 84 percent of those having participated in Erasmus+ exchange state that they feel more „European“ than before. And 93 % of former participants in Erasmus+ youth exchanges feel that they have become more tolerant<sup>11</sup>. These are important findings at a time when the EU and its member states are at odds with the rise of euroscepticism and demagoguery across the continent. It is obvious that these considerations are taken into account when reflecting about the amounts of money to spend on Erasmus+. The EU's best known, largely popular and least controversial funding scheme seems to be heading for a brilliant and ambitious continuation.



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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.czelo.cz/files/prezentace-pozvanky/Sophia-Eriksson-Neth-ER-seminar-Beyond-2020.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.czelo.cz/files/prezentace-pozvanky/Sophia-Eriksson-Neth-ER-seminar-Beyond-2020.pdf>