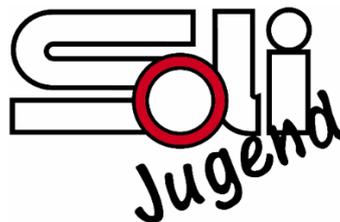




Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Evangelischen Jugend in Deutschland e.V.



Bundesvereinigung  
Kulturelle Kinder- und Jugendbildung e.V.



## **Erasmus+ Youth in Action 2014-2020**

The switch in funding practice for European youth work projects from a dedicated youth programme known as Youth in Action (2007-2013) to an integrated programme section referred to as Erasmus+ Youth in Action (2014-2020) brought many major changes. Two and a half years after the move, Germany's national advisory council for Erasmus+ Youth in Action, which advises the implementation of the youth chapter of Erasmus+ in Germany on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ), has now carried out an initial evaluation. This evaluation will also be reflected in the German country report that in turn will form part of the EU's mid-term review of Erasmus+.

The signatory organisations, all of which are members of the BMFSFJ's national advisory council for Erasmus+ Youth in Action in Germany, have produced this public statement based on their experiences with implementing Erasmus+ Youth in Action so far.

### **Statement on the implementation of Erasmus+ Youth in Action so far**

The signatories confirm the major significance of the Erasmus+ (2014-2020) programme when it comes to enabling young people to learn through cross-border mobility schemes. The signatories highlight the strong role especially of the Erasmus+ Youth in Action sub-programme and welcome its implementation, which began in 2014. In light of the political developments of the last two years, in particular, it is now clearer than ever how important it is to promote European citizenship, democratic awareness, plurality, diversity and engagement in Europe via Erasmus+ Youth in Action, and how valuable its contribution is towards a cohesive European society and the continued development of the European project.

The signatories underline the importance and necessity of a separate chapter for youth (Youth in Action) within Erasmus+. Since its inception, Erasmus+ Youth in Action has emerged as the programme sector within which young people's European citizenship is developed as they undergo non-formal and informal learning through cross-border mobility schemes. Thanks to its specific profile, Erasmus+ Youth in Action has succeeded in forging a closer relationship between the youth section of the programme and European youth policy objectives, such as the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field/the EU Youth Strategy (2010-2018). Experience has shown that the existence of a separate, dedicated youth chapter in the shape of Erasmus+ Youth in Action is vital for ensuring that the needs of young people, youth work experts, implementing bodies and organisations, initiatives and facilities in the youth field are fully met. Working in partnership with stakeholders, this is how the objectives of youth-specific strategies and activities in the youth work and youth policy field can be fulfilled.

It is encouraging that core elements of the predecessor programme have reappeared in Erasmus+ Youth in Action (notably youth exchanges, European Volunteer Service, mobility schemes for experts, Structured Dialogue) either as they were or in improved form. It is this continuity, amongst other things, that has made it possible to maintain and even raise the very high level of participation amongst participants with special needs or fewer opportunities. In addition, Key Action 2 (Opportunities for cooperation for innovation and

exchange of good practice) has given the youth field a new and open framework for innovative projects which, via Strategic Partnerships with other areas of education (school, vocational training, higher education), helps to promote an exchange of good practices and produce new ideas and outcomes.

The signatories point out that the increase in the budget plus the setup of a dedicated budget line with a fixed volume of 10 per cent of the overall budget of approximately EUR 14.7 billion over the entire term of the programme is essential to ensure an appropriate level of financial support for the youth area, and that this must remain so in future. Despite some predominantly administrative issues that applicants encountered after the programme was launched, in the first phase of its existence the programme has managed to consume the entire volume of funding available to Germany. The first two years have also shown that since demand clearly exceeds supply, all available funding will continue to be utilised.

The signatories wish to emphasise that when it comes to the youth field, in particular, the largely decentralised implementation of the programme in the programme countries through National Agencies, and their cooperation within a network, is a precondition for the programme's success. This is the only way to ensure that Erasmus+ Youth in Action is adequately recognised in Germany, that its target groups are reached, and that European youth projects can be implemented given the special circumstances surrounding child and youth welfare in Germany. In this regard, the first two years have shown that it was the right decision to assign responsibility for implementing Erasmus+ Youth in Action in the youth field to a youth-specific National Agency in the shape of JUGEND für Europa. Having a variety of National Agencies, all of which make valuable contributions to their sector and have close connections to the target group, is an asset that should be maintained in future.

The integrated Erasmus+ programme for education, training, youth and sport enjoys greater public and political attention, which in turn also benefits the youth section of the programme.

By offering opportunities for cross-sectoral activities, Key Action 2 emulates the cross-sectoral approach of the EU Youth Strategy (2010-2018) and recognises young people as school or university students, volunteers, apprentices or any kind of voluntary participants as common target groups for youth work activities.

Almost three years have passed since the programme was launched, during which time the programme's various stakeholders have gathered a lot of experience with implementing it. Some teething problems have been overcome, with steps taken to respond to any challenges and find better solutions. That said, there is still a need for action and continued improvement, which we would like to outline in the following. Our aim is to continue strengthening youth work across Europe and to assist young people and their organisations in taking an active role in a colourful, connected Europe, communicating European values, and promoting democracy across Europe.

### **Ensure that non-formal education is adequately reflected in Erasmus+**

In the early years, the EU's Europe 2020 strategy and the excessively high youth unemployment rate in Europe left clear marks on the overall Erasmus+ programme. To begin

with, it was clearly dominated by labour market considerations. It was only when the EU's education ministers adopted the Paris Declaration in early 2014, urging action against intolerance, discrimination and radicalisation, that greater emphasis was laid on non-formal youth education. In light of the political and social changes we have been seeing in recent years, the objectives and the general framework of the Youth in Action sector of the programme as a platform for non-formal learning for young people should be pushed back up the agenda. Greater emphasis must be given to promoting European dialogue, European citizenship, volunteering, the elimination of prejudices and the development of democratic and other values. Labour market policy is a concern that is taken care of, inter alia, by the European Social Fund.

### **Establish a subcommittee for youth-specific issues under the EU's Erasmus+ Committee**

The connection foreseen in the EU Regulation establishing Erasmus+ between the objectives of the youth sector and the objectives of European youth policy (including the EU Youth Strategy) has lost definition, as has the visibility of specific youth-policy objectives in the European Commission's annual work plans and priorities. Instead, more reference is being made to the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy whose relevance for the field of youth is highly abstract. The youth field lacks a platform upon which to discuss its issues at the EU level and to help evolve the youth-related sector of the programme. These needs are not being met since the primary role of the recently established programme committee for the overall programme is administrative; also, there is a lack of sector-specific debate.

### **Establish Youth in Action as a brand that is recognisable all over Europe**

The integrated Erasmus+ programme for education and training, youth and sport is generally receiving more public and political attention, from which the youth section also benefits. However, the general perception of Erasmus+ in the media and the wider public is that of a programme for students. Although the relevant EU Regulation stipulates that all of the programme brand names that have been brought under the Erasmus+ umbrella brand will continue to be used, they are not being used consistently and actively enough. This is also true for the wording used on the websites of the EU Commission websites, the National Agencies and other political decision-makers. In publications, brochures and in particular in the European Commission's Programme Guide these brand names should be used consistently. The gradual disappearance of the established brand name and logo is making it difficult for all users to find the youth sub-programme and is eroding the strong profile that Youth in Action has built across Europe.

### **The Youth in Action sub-programme is an exceptionally powerful structure that requires better funding**

In terms of the number of mobility-related applications, project approvals and participating organisations, Youth in Action is the biggest single consumer of funding under Erasmus+. This claim is borne out by the European statistics for 2014: although only ten per cent of Erasmus+ funding is earmarked for Youth in Action, more than 11,000 project applications were submitted, of which around 6,000 were granted – the largest number of applications and approvals. Overall, more than 30 per cent of submitted applications and project approvals were accounted for by Youth in Action. The youth sub-programme has succeeded

in reaching out to almost 30,000 organisations across Europe, more than the other Erasmus+ sector programmes. These organisations account for more than half of all organisations that in some way participate in Erasmus+. And with just under 150,000 young participants, Youth in Action not only accounts for the largest number of participants from all areas, but also for 25 per cent of all people involved in Erasmus+ mobility measures. What is particularly impressive is that 53,000 participants with special requirements and fewer opportunities have received financial support under the programme, of which more than 50,000, or around 95 per cent, took part in a youth-related activity. The reach and the positive impact of the Youth in Action sub-programme could be increased exponentially if it were better funded.

### **Increase Youth in Action funding that actually reaches the projects**

The overall budget for Erasmus+ has been increased considerably during the current funding period, which was referred to by the European Commission and the European Parliament as a great success. However, this increase is not yet being felt by the individual projects. Only for 2017 has an increase in the annual budget been promised that may be capable of raising the funding rate. That said, if the current approach is maintained, this will only raise the number of projects receiving funding, not the amount of funding that can be paid to individual projects.

### **Rejection rates up despite a higher budget**

The increased budget has led applicants to expect a higher funding rate as well as more funding for the individual projects. However, the Erasmus+ budget will only undergo an exponential increase in the current funding period, meaning that the Erasmus+ annual budget will not be increased before 2017. The European Commission and the National Agencies should have communicated this more clearly in advance – demand for funding under Erasmus+ Youth in Action already exceeds the amount available to an unprecedented degree. For this reason, as regards Erasmus+ Youth in Action, the funding rates for the three Key Actions (KA) in Germany are declining: for KA 1 (mobility), it was 63 per cent in 2015 (2013: 81 per cent); for KA 2 (Strategic Partnerships and transnational youth initiatives), it was 18 per cent in 2015; and for KA 3 (policy reform), it was 41 per cent in 2015 (2013: 82 per cent). In fact, the funding rates in other countries are even lower. For applicants in the youth field, funding rates of below 50 per cent are highly critical. The existing structures, which for the most part rely on volunteers, lack the resources to carry out activities whose payback is uncertain. Now that businesses and commercial providers of formal education services (which are better staffed) have been admitted to the programme, a larger number of applicants for youth-related projects are now competing for the budget under KA 2 to whom this format is completely new. Youth organisations are suffering disproportionately from this setup, so they need to be given sound advice and support on this Key Action. The relatively high rejection rates could mean that organisations and institutions that lack experience with European projects and programmes may refrain from submitting an application altogether, while applicants that have been rejected may decide not to do any European-scale projects at all in future.

### **Adjust lump sums to real costs**

The lump sums require adjustment in the following areas: In Key Action 2, the management lump sum is too low, for instance when it comes to dissemination, which plays a major role in the new programme. All dissemination activities are accounted for by the management lump sums. EUR 250 for partner organisations and EUR 500 for the coordinating organisation does not cover the cost of, say, producing a mid-term and final report and building and maintaining a website. Like the staff costs relating to intellectual outputs, lump sums should be scaled depending on income groups (country groups). Likewise, the lump sums for equipment costs as well as the eligible amounts for subcontracting are not high enough. The cost of translation, for instance, is high. For Youth in Action the lump sums are lowest, with EUR 80 paid per participant for distances of between 100 and 499 km, while under the Comenius or Grundtvig sectors, EUR 180 is paid for the same distance. We also consider it problematic that the lump sums for participants in youth exchanges and in expert programmes are not the same. It would be helpful if identical lump sums were introduced for all types of activity in the various Key Actions and programme areas. Neither does it make sense that travel expenses are only recognised if the distance travelled exceeds 99 km. Introducing a lump sum for travel expenses for distances of under 99 km in all Key Actions would be a definite improvement. Finally, a special arrangement should be considered for participants travelling from remote regions, whose travel expenses are disproportionately higher despite careful planning.

### **Enable smaller organisations to participate**

We believe that the new distinction between Strategic Partnerships that promote innovation and innovative practices and the dissemination thereof, and Strategic Partnerships that serve to exchange good practices and build networks, is a major improvement. As the programme progresses from here, care should be taken to ensure that both types of Strategic Partnership are given equal attention and priority as far as this is possible. The introduction of the Lead Partner principle and the high expectations placed the quality of the products/innovations to be developed present major challenges for project coordinators. Many smaller, inexperienced organisations and those with few administrative resources are unable to meet the organisational and financial requirements and will hence refrain from submitting an application. In this regard, the German National Agency JUGEND für Europa's recent manual on Strategic Partnerships (German title: "Förderstrategie Strategische Partnerschaften") is a good example of how to provide assistance to inexperienced organisers and applicants. The National Agencies should step up their efforts to communicate the variety and diversity of Strategic Partnerships in the youth field. That said, such ex-post forms of assistance should not distract from the fact that organisations that lack experience and resources are generally in danger of turning away from the programme owing to its complexity and sophisticated requirements.

### **Use proven formats – Restore the strength of youth initiatives**

The youth-specific project format "youth initiatives", which was developed during the previous funding period for Youth in Action (2007-2013), is now part of Key Action 2, where it has become all but invisible and is being used less and less. Although it had become a major format for non-organised groups, it is now in danger of becoming obsolete, which

cannot be allowed to happen. The transnational youth initiatives do not fit into this category, neither in terms of the requirements to be met by the projects, nor in terms of the philosophy behind Key Action 2. As we are talking about projects run by non-organised groups, the transnational youth initiatives should at least be given greater definition and visibility within Key Action 2.

### **Strengthen the European Voluntary Service (EVS)**

The EVS is a particularly intense learning format for young people that requires a reliable, high-quality framework. The experience of the last two decades has shown that support from education experts prior to an assignment abroad is an indispensable part of the scheme. Funding for organisations that provide this support to volunteers (before their departure and after their return) should hence again be made part of the regular lump sum paid per sending activity that is due to every sending organisation, even if the volunteer drops out of the scheme. The European Commission's template agreement should be realigned with the procedure that was standard under the previous programme, which required the signature of the volunteer and a representative of both the sending and the host organisation. Support for language learning has rightly been recognised as a core element of the EVS; the promoters welcome the stronger sense of obligation that is the result of having introduced language testing. However, simply providing an online tool for language learning is not enough to ensure that young people actually develop robust foreign language skills. Consideration should hence be given to funding for additional language learning facilities. The EVS database is not up to date and confusing to use. In addition, smaller organisations are increasingly having to compete with promoters that have consolidated EVS budgets. To ensure that young people with fewer opportunities can access the EVS, coordinating units such as youth work organisations in Germany should be brought on board. The centralised structures that exist between the National Agencies and individual host organisations "on the ground" are preventing the scheme from reaching out to disadvantaged young people.

### **Provide more room for manoeuvre for the Structured Dialogue**

Projects under Key Action 3 can only be applied for in a decentralised manner if they are part of Youth in Action. This special rule gives greater strength to the youth area and also strengthens the link between the European funding mechanism and the European Youth Strategy. However, the lump sums have been fixed with a small number of large-scale events in mind. In the case of Germany, this contradicts the philosophy behind the Structured Dialogue, which calls for longer-term, more intense dialogue processes. In addition, the introduction of lump sums has meant that projects are receiving less overall funding than under the predecessor programme, since additional grants to defray expenses such as fees for experiential education or artistic/cultural work are no longer available. The cap on the number of events (maximum: 15) stipulated in the application form for one- or two-year projects should be removed so that smaller groups of participants can get together more frequently. What is more, a complex undertaking such as the establishment of the Structured Dialogue requires additional items in the budget to account for fees and PR. While we welcome the introduction of the option to apply for two-year projects, too, the funding ceiling needs to be lifted at the same time; it currently remains at EUR 50,000 even for two-year projects.

## **Provide more support for people with disabilities and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds**

We generally welcome the fact that the proportion of participating/financially supported young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (32 per cent) and young people with disabilities (4.1 per cent) has risen, which is in line with the declared aim of Erasmus+. Around 30 per cent of projects are centred on inclusion. However, activities involving people from less advantaged backgrounds require greater educational support before, during and after the actual event. This in turn requires higher funding. The exact additional amount must be indicated already in the application form, yet it is very difficult to estimate beforehand, especially when participants with psychosocial or mental incapacities are involved. To ensure full inclusion, it must be made possible to adjust the additional amount of funding ex post. The amount incurred by providing support to participants with disabilities may not count towards the maximum amount that can be applied for. In addition, it must be made easier for promoters, initiatives and organisations that work with young people from less disadvantaged backgrounds or with disabilities to have the cost of their own full-time staff recognised as eligible for funding. This is vital in order to ensure continuity when it comes to providing the support that these young people so urgently need.

## **Ensure that National Agencies provide the same kind of information across Europe**

The way in which the European National Agencies provide information varies greatly. This is the case concerning the first-time registration of project partners via the URF (Unique Registration Facility) and the ECAS database (European Commission Authentication Service), as well as when it comes to approving project applications or advising applicants, e.g., on producing a project abstract. To ensure that projects and project applications can be prepared effectively, project partners need to have access to the same or very similar formats and information regardless of where they are in Europe.

The following information on the National Agencies' websites urgently needs to be harmonised across the EU:

Key Action 1: Harmonised information on Youth in Action preparatory meetings

Key Action 2: Provision of information on centralised and decentralised application procedures for eligible project formats (Strategic Partnerships, alliances, capacity building) by the National Agencies

Key Action 3: Harmonised information on activities and funding for Structured Dialogue projects

Harmonised information on special support for participants with mental or psychological incapacities

Harmonised information on exceptional costs

## **Provide clearer information on the participation of non-EU countries**

Strategic Partnerships under Key Action 2 (Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices) require the involvement of at least two partner organisations from at least two EU programme countries. The involvement of an additional country outside of Europe is only possible if this delivers substantiated *added value* to the Strategic Partnership. However, neither the Programme Guide nor the National Agencies offer any helpful information on what this added value actually is, and how to apply for funding for a non-EU country. The European Commission needs to provide clear information on this and disseminate it via the National Agencies.

## **Make the Programme Guide more user-friendly**

The European Commission's Programme Guide, which stretches to more than 300 pages, is not user-friendly and is daunting especially for first-time applicants. For the most part, the information is not clearly structured and not exactly self-explanatory, particularly for inexperienced applicants. For instance, it is not made clear what expenses are eligible for lump-sum funding and what expenses are recognised as eligible in a post-project audit. Supporting applicants by providing information in a user-friendly, target group-centred manner should be a top priority for the European Commission and the National Agencies. This is vital in order to attract new applicants and in turn open up new target groups for the programme. Applicants are finding it very difficult to work out what funding is available in the respective sectors. The situation would be vastly improved if the Programme Guide were structured by brand name and then by Key Action.

## **Simplify the application and justification process**

Despite promises to the contrary, the amount of effort involved in project applications, financial reporting and administration has not gone down; instead, due to lengthier and more complex procedures it has actually increased. The "one size fits all" approach has led to more incongruence between the regulations and the intended projects, as well as to much higher hurdles for applicants from the youth field. The heightened complexity involved in applying for and submitting financial reports on projects has meant that some smaller organisations and grassroots initiatives are turning their backs on the programme altogether. The effort required for individual projects in using the new mobility tool is too great. At the moment, in the youth field all financial reporting-related entries have to be made by a representative of the project. The introduction of the mobility tool has meant that organisations running projects in any Key Action have to expend an enormous amount of extra time and logistical effort in using it, plus they are experiencing severe technical difficulties. The mobility tool should be redesigned to make it more user-friendly and enable users to scan and upload hand-written lists of participants as a justification.

## **Issue Programme Guide and application forms in one go**

For applicants, the Programme Guide and the application forms represent one important package. The problem is that the annual publication of the updated Programme Guide currently does not always go hand in hand with the updated application forms. Every time the deadline for Youth in Action changes, the European Commission publishes new

application forms yet they are often only made available four weeks before the deadline in question. This puts applicants and organisations under enormous timewise and technical pressure. What is more, the application forms are published in a variety of versions, and the forms in French and German are published even later than the English version. If the application forms were valid for a whole year, and published to coincide with the updated versions of the Programme Guide, the situation would be greatly improved.

### **Varying application deadlines may not impact negatively on Youth in Action**

Under Youth in Action, projects in any of the three Key Actions can be applied for subject to three deadlines per year – a necessary rule for the youth field and its structures. Since other programme areas have only one or two application deadlines per year, Key Action 2 is seeing a higher number of applications from other educational areas. Access to the youth budget should be reserved for applicants from the youth field only; also, it should be restricted to applicants and youth work organisations that assume the lead in a Strategic Partnership.

### **Discontinue the practice of evaluating applications only by external auditors**

The introduction of external auditors for Youth in Action applications exceeding EUR 60,000 has not proven its worth so far. This move has broken the link between those who advise applicants and those who evaluate their applications. The way the evaluations are worded frequently leads to requests for clarification and confusion among applicants. Some applications that were reviewed and resubmitted after rejection and feedback from an auditor actually received even fewer points from the auditors the second time around. Applications need to be evaluated in a uniform and coordinated manner by one central unit, with support from external auditors. The practice of having applications audited and judged exclusively by external auditors is not adequate.