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Erasmus+ mid-term evaluation – the Swiss feedback

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1 Introduction

Switzerland pleads for a strong European cooperation in education in order to strengthen the knowledge and competences of all Europeans and in this way contribute to the welfare and competitiveness of Europe in the world.

Switzerland has participated in European education and training programmes in diverse forms since 1992. It has for value to maintain positive collaborative practices with its partner, hence its desire to contribute to the mid-term evaluation of Erasmus+.

As partner country in Erasmus+ since 2014, we believe Switzerland's input can bring significant perspectives on this topic. Not only can it broaden the understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Erasmus+ but it can also bring support to the development of the next programme generation.

This report, prepared between May and December 2016, is based on opinions and recommendations of selected stakeholders in Switzerland, namely the National Agency (NA) 'ch Foundation'¹ and programme beneficiaries. In addition, the steering national and cantonal authorities commented on the report.

Switzerland actively participates in Erasmus+. While Switzerland is currently² not associated to Erasmus+, Swiss partner organisations are still allowed to participate as a partner country, benefitting either from EU funding or in the framework of a complementary Swiss funding scheme (Swiss Interim Solution for Erasmus+). Within learning mobility of individuals, Swiss institutions can be funded for outgoing and incoming mobility via the Swiss interim solution that fosters learning mobility of individuals between programme countries and Switzerland. In strategic partnerships especially, **Switzerland encourages participation in project consortia**. In Higher Education (HE), for example, Switzerland is the partner country with the highest number of organisations involved in strategic partnership projects selected in 2014 and 2015. Swiss participants have experienced the **strengths and weaknesses of the programme** and are qualified to contribute on how the programme could be improved. Swiss stakeholders have also been involved in several policy reform projects, which provide a better knowledge base and enable a better coordination in education policy issues.

Moreover, 'opening to the world' through partnerships involving partner countries is an explicit aim of the European Commission (EC)³. A Swiss feedback can thus highlight some of the **challenges and potentials related to international cooperation within Erasmus+**.

What does the Swiss feedback cover?

Due to the status of Switzerland as partner country (Region 5⁴) and the consequential restricted participation options, the Swiss feedback focuses on experiences with activities implemented within **KA2**. Within KA2, Swiss applicants can participate as full⁵ and associate⁶ partners in centrally as well as de-centrally managed actions, in particular in:

- Strategic Partnerships;
- Knowledge Alliances;
- Sector Skills Alliances;
- Sport Collaborative Partnerships.

¹ NA between 2010 and 2016; replaced as NA by movetia as of 1 January 2017

² Following the adoption of the mass immigration initiative on 9 February 2014 by Swiss voters, negotiations on an association to Erasmus+ have been suspended and Switzerland is only able to participate as a partner country.

³ http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/home/erasmus-plus_en

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/sites/erasmusplus/files/files/resources/erasmus-plus-programme-guide_en.pdf, p. 23.

⁵ 'full third country partners' in Erasmus+ projects are funded by the EU.

⁶ 'associated third country partners' are not funded by the EU. They fund their participation either through the interim solution set up by the Swiss Government or through own funding.

Although Switzerland supports the mobility of individual learners, these activities are exclusively funded with Swiss budget and are thus **not covered** directly in this report. Also KA3 activities are not covered in this report due to small participation numbers.

2 Current challenges

Swiss programme beneficiaries as well as the steering and implementing bodies perceive Erasmus+ and its specific actions supported under KA2 as very **attractive** and highlight the **importance of the programme's contribution to European exchange and cooperation**. They **welcome the integration of several programmes into Erasmus+ in general**, even though raising doubts about the integrated programme's real potential to foster collaboration across educational fields and sectors, and hence to increase effectiveness, efficiency and relevance. They thus call for a consolidation of the programme in its current form rather than a further harmonisation that would not respect sector specificities. They outline potential for improvement regarding the (1) complexity of the programme, (2) low success rates and other challenges related to financial issues, (3) the limits of the 'one size fits all' approach, and (4) openness to the world.

Complex programme architecture, application procedures and project management

Swiss beneficiaries as well as the steering and implementing bodies appreciate the efforts made towards simplification of the Erasmus+ processes and recognise the progress achieved in this respect. They e.g. positively acknowledge the increasing use of lump sum funding across the programme. However, despite these improvements, they still see room for improvement. The representatives of the NA as well as KA2 Project Participants (KA2 PP) provide examples of **complexities that impede efficiency, limit effectiveness and hinder the participation of some stakeholders** in Erasmus+. In School Education, the complexity of KA2 projects in terms of partner search, planning and management is an essential obstacle. The major reason being that teachers usually cannot afford spending the necessary time on project development and management unless being heavily supported by the school administration – which is often not the case.

The Youth sector faces severe problems in promoting the programme and making it attractive for target groups which seem to struggle with the administrative aspects of their application. This is a reason why representatives of the Youth sector do not so far consider the integration of several programmes into Erasmus+ as very effective. In VET and adult education as well, the complex forms and time-consuming application process are mentioned as obstacles.

Some commentators warn about the consequences of favouring large-scale projects that include a wide number of partners. In HE, for example, a number of institutions would like to start with smaller cooperation projects such as Summer and Winter Schools or intensive study programmes. However, they do not find the available Erasmus+ offer – requiring many project partners and long project durations – attractive enough to do so.

Low success rates and resources challenge

The demand for KA2 cooperation projects in all education sectors exceeds the available budgets by far, which is on the one hand a proof for their popularity, but on the other hand also leads to **very low success rates. Should it remain so, some proportion of the target populations will not apply to – and hence not participate in – Erasmus+**. They will rather renounce using European exchange and mobility opportunities at all or look for less formalised ways (e.g. projects with own funding).

Moreover, the representatives of the NA as well as KA2 PP point out that more funding is needed for (a) certain actions such as Strategic Partnerships in HE and Youth Exchanges, and (b) certain tasks such as project preparation, implementation in national environments and dissemination of knowledge, as well as including adequate reimbursement of expenses for work force, travel and management.

The current situation tends to favour large organisations able to provide additional funding of their own.

'One-size fits all' has its limits

Swiss beneficiaries and implementing bodies acknowledge that the **harmonisation of rules and regulations under Erasmus+ has had positive effects** but point out that, as of now, **sector specificities must be respected in order to achieve the programme's objectives**. At NA level, increased efficiency has been achieved in marketing, evaluation and project management. At beneficiary level, stakeholders have not observed increases in effectiveness, efficiency and relevance and rather point out some negative effects for their specific sectors.

Openness to the world

Swiss institutions appreciate the **programme's focus on excellence and quality** that calls on the **most relevant partners from all over the world to join forces** and work together in a project. Nevertheless, they see a major **barrier that impedes international cooperation** within Erasmus+: the 'added value clause'⁷ and, in particular, its role in the evaluation phase. In the project evaluation, a project team is assessed against "*the extent to which the involvement of a participating organisation from a partner country brings an essential added value to the project (if this condition is not fulfilled, the project will not be considered for selection)*"⁸. Each consortium that envisages international collaboration thus risks – due to the 'added value clause' – that the project is being rejected as a whole in the evaluation phase. Evidence shows that, in order to avoid this risk, several NAs consistently advise their target audience not to include partner countries.

An additional challenge for the development of international cooperation is the lack of information or incomplete information about how programme countries can safely and successfully include partner countries, be it as full or associate partners. Consortia aiming for international cooperation often have to invest more resources to find out the relevant details, especially about good practice examples for successful integration of participants from a partner country. Once an international project partner is accepted to the consortium as a full partner, it does not have the same opportunities as the other members, e.g. limited access to funds. Restricting access to certain activities for partner countries regrettably discourages collaboration.

⁷ The Erasmus+ Programme Guide, Version 2 (2016) mentions that "...organisations from Partner Countries can be involved in a Strategic Partnership, as partners (not as applicants), if their participation brings an essential added value to the project." (p. 111).

⁸ Erasmus+ Programme Guide, Version 2 (2016), p. 115

3 Recommendations for the future

Based on the challenges outlined above, we recommend the following.

Simplify application procedures and project management

Switzerland highly values the decentralised management in Erasmus+ and acknowledges the need for an equivalent implementation in all participating countries. Nevertheless, Swiss institutions involved in Erasmus+ activities **call for simplifications** in the programme implementation. **More flexibility** (e.g. with unit costs and processes) could support stakeholders to deal with sector-specific needs and unforeseen circumstances. We thus recommend to:

- Increase flexibility of existing instruments, particularly in order to allow for smaller, less complex projects;
- Reduce length and complexity of application and report forms;
- Reduce administrative burden in the submission and project implementation phases, particularly where reporting requirements conflict with national law, e.g. the obligation to submit working contracts of all project staff;
- Allow for more flexibility to adapt the level of unit costs to the effective needs of the respective participating country;
- Allow for more flexibility in the project implementation phase, e.g. to shift more than 10% of the budget from one item to another.

Improve financial attractiveness

Switzerland appreciates the considerable growth of EU funding in education throughout the programme duration until 2020. Swiss programme beneficiaries and the implementing bodies strongly call for changes that **improve the (financial) attractiveness** of the programme and the resources available for target groups. We recommend to:

- Provide appropriate budget shares per action in order to optimize the low success rates in certain actions;
- Provide enough funding and adequate flexibility for coordination and communication – particularly from small organisations – in order to prevent that project partners face inadequate amounts of unpaid work, leading to financial risks for them.

Respect sector-specificities

The integrated approach of the programme has allowed exploiting synergies between education sectors. However, several concrete **suggestions that could increase the programme's effectiveness, efficiency and relevance** in their education sectors have been put forward. We recommend to:

Higher Education

- Provide enough funding for KA2 projects and reintroduce funding possibilities for small-scale projects to start off with collaborations;
- Increase awareness among the target population of the possible synergies with other Erasmus+ (e.g. Jean Monnet) and research-related activities (e.g. Horizon 2020). Two HE representatives explicitly described how their experiences with research collaboration in Erasmus+ were used to also collaborate in Horizon 2020 and vice versa;
- Lumps sums simplify project management, but many partner perceive their level as too low.

School Education

- Provide enough funding for KA1. KA1 is considered clearly more effective and efficient than KA2 for school education since the application process as well as the projects themselves are less complex, less time-consuming, and more flexible and independent;

- For KA2 projects, taking a larger group of children on exchange could improve the efficiency of the project;
- Low-threshold activities, such as single mobilities in KA1 for pupils in secondary school, could improve the success of the programme in the school sector.

Adult education

- Strengthen KA1 for Adult education without neglecting KA2. Despite the fact that KA2 is considered a very effective instrument for the adult education sector, the implementation of KA1 is perceived as clearly more efficient than that of KA2.

VET

- Provide the possibility within KA2 to adapt different kinds of actions to sector-specific needs. "Exchange of good practices" is e.g. adapted to the school sector, but not for VET;
- Offer long-term funding to best practice projects in KA1 (5 years and more, such as the extended European Charter for Higher Education).

Youth

- Provide enough budget for Youth Exchange instrument, since Youth Exchanges are considered the most effective actions within the youth field;
- Reintroduce national youth initiatives and national TCAs.

Evaluate barriers for international collaboration

In order to achieve the programme's aim of being open to the world, efficient support is needed for international collaboration. The following ideas on how to **improve the implementation of international cooperation** have been mentioned:

- Allow evaluators to suggest excluding a partner country organisation from a project consortium, instead of rejecting the whole project, if the added value of the partner cannot be demonstrated convincingly;
- If partner country organisations are accepted to a project consortium as full partners, they should be granted equal treatment compared to programme country partners (same access to funds, e.g. to 'exceptional costs', and the possibility to fund individual learners' mobility from programme to partner countries within intensive programmes);
- Work towards transparent information and consistent evaluation practices by all NAs in order to improve conditions for international cooperation for beneficiaries from programme countries and partner countries;
- Consider allowing partner countries to access relevant online exchange platforms.