

Erasmus+: Education quality at heart

Embrace progress; keep it simple!


Position Paper: Evaluation Erasmus+ (2014-2020)
and Erasmus+ (2021-2027)

In this position paper, the association Neth-ER expresses its gratitude for the past and current European education programmes: Erasmus+ (2014-2020) and Erasmus+ (2021-2027). Neth-ER is an association based in Brussels that represents eleven Dutch organisations involved in the field of education, research, and innovation.

In our perspective, there are four key points that should be considered when designing a forthcoming European programme aimed at enhancing the quality of education in the European Union:

- 1. The quality of education is always the goal, and Erasmus+ the means**
- 2. Clarity & transparency around strategic goals**
- 3. Simplify and streamline the programme as much as possible**
- 4. Focus on reciprocal and equal international cooperation**

Neth-ER eagerly anticipates collaborating with European institutions, national governments, and stakeholder organisations to shape the future of this programme.



“Erasmus+ enables a greater number of students to gain an international experience, contributing to knowledge development that extends beyond their country of origin. At the same time, challenges persist in terms of equal opportunities.”

Ugoeze Anyanwu Podler
Board member at the
Dutch National Student
Union (LsvB)

“Gaining an international perspective is highly important for vocational education students. By connecting with other cultures we learn from them and understand them better. The Erasmus+ programme makes an international experience more accessible for all vocational education students, the board of JOB however believes Erasmus+ could do more to facilitate international skills at EQF level 1 and 2, which requires shorter mobility periods and stimulating internationalisation@ home!”

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Board JobMBO

I. Education quality as the goal, Erasmus+ as a means

Recommendations

- The primary objective of Erasmus+ should always be the **enhancement of the quality of education**
- Learning mobility should be accessible across all sectors and to everyone, with attention given to the **integration of mobility experiences into participants' regular educational paths**
- **Double the current budget** to sustain the positive trajectory of the current program

Neth-ER emphasizes that the primary objective of Erasmus+ always should be **the enhancement of the quality of education**. This should be achieved within the provisions and initiatives of the European Education Area, the Bologna process, and the Copenhagen process. As a crucial tool for improving education, Erasmus+ benefits individual growth, bolsters the EU's competitiveness, and addresses societal challenges. Additionally, by expanding the EU knowledge base, Erasmus+ promotes greater equity in education quality between member states, facilitating increased student mobility.

This commitment to quality should be reflected in various aspects of the programme. **Learning mobility of both students and staff** is essential for personal and professional growth, fostering intercultural competences necessary for success in international labour markets and societies. Learning mobility should be accessible across all sectors and to everyone, with attention given to **the integration of mobility experiences into students' regular educational paths**. The programme should guarantee immediate and automatic recognition of achievements upon return.

Cross-border cooperation projects facilitated through **strategic partnerships** contribute to education quality within member states, promoting mutual exchange and recognition. High quality policy initiatives foster trust in each other's education systems and strengthens the effectiveness of other EU education instruments such as the EQF, ECTS, ESG, EQAVET, and accreditation tools.

The two flagship initiatives of Erasmus+, the **European Universities and Centers of Vocational Excellence** play a key role in improving the quality of education in Europe. Neth-ER emphasizes the need for a sustainable continuation of these flagship initiatives in order to maintain their systemic impact. Therefore, expanding the scope of structural cooperation projects, without compromising individual learning mobility, is imperative.

Promoting the quality of education requires both **broadening and deepening** of the flagship initiatives. **Discussions on expanding their reach** are necessary, even beyond the programme's end in 2027. Simultaneously, the substantive added value of the current networks must become increasingly visible, particularly in light of the 2025 deadline for the European Education Area. Improving their quality is primarily a bottom-up process that necessitates active **participation from staff and students**, with efforts to better connect the latter to these initiatives.

Neth-ER recognizes that education is assuming greater responsibility amid various societal changes and long-term challenges. These include the need to balance growing mobility demands with the green and digital transitions within Erasmus+. To sustain the positive trajectory of the current programme, a significantly increased budget is imperative. Therefore Neth-ER advocates for at least **doubling the current budget** as a minimum requirement.



“The Erasmus+ program provides our students with fantastic opportunities.

The increased focus on inclusivity, as well as the green and digital transitions, align well with what our students value.

However, the student perspective should always be represented within education, including within the EUI alliances. This can be achieved through a student advisory board or student forum, for example. Continuity and stability of student representation are essential for achieving a bottom-up approach.

Terri van der Velden
President at the Dutch
National Student Association
(ISO)

“The collaboration within and between CoVEs is unique. It is important to meet, trust, delve into substantive topics such as urban greening, and continue looking ahead together within an ecosystem of learning, working, and innovating. The future will look different from what we currently conceive, but we must already explore the context together.

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Annemarie Moons
Chair of the Executive Board
at Yuverta (MBO Raad)

II. Clarity & transparency on strategic goals

Recommendations

- To achieve strategic goals on the green and digital transition, as well as promoting inclusion **clear frameworks** are essential in translating priorities into practical actions
- **Clarify** the position of Erasmus+ within these transitions and the promotion of Europe's strategic autonomy
- **Clarify the Commission's vision** for the **Centers of Vocational Excellence** and the **European Universities initiative**, to enable institutions to make informed decisions about their involvement

The rapidly changing world necessitates the modernization of European education systems, including the cultivation of a lifelong learning culture. In this regard, the Erasmus+ programme plays a vital role by contributing to European strategic goals such as the green and digital transition, as well as promoting inclusion.

To achieve these objectives, **clear, and realistic frameworks** are essential to guide National Agencies and educational institutions in translating priorities into practical actions. This not only enhances visibility and fosters positive attitudes towards Erasmus+ but also allows institutions to focus on specific **strategic goals**, providing **flexibility** and fostering specialization. By empowering institutions to develop expertise and tailor programmes to diverse needs, Erasmus+ can maximize its impact and promote quality and cooperation in education.

Neth-ER acknowledges the importance of modernizing education systems, recognizing their crucial role in successfully navigating the digital and green transitions. However, Neth-ER emphasizes the need for greater **clarification and communication** regarding the positioning of Erasmus+ within these transitions and the promotion

of European strategic autonomy. It is imperative to make clear choices based on strategic considerations, particularly in the context of the programme's commitment to the green transition. The current **green top-up** does not sufficiently incentivize participants to opt for greener travel alternatives, and it fails to effectively compete with air travel. Neth-ER suggests a more strategic approach, where the top-up budget is allocated to large-scale projects that promote green mobility. By combining clear frameworks that prioritize green travel with financial incentives, the Erasmus+ programme can be made more efficient in its **commitment to sustainability**.

Furthermore, the educational sector seeks **greater clarity on the Commission's vision** for Erasmus+ flagship initiatives, the **Centers of Vocational Excellence** and the **European Universities initiative**. While these initiatives aim to transform education, there is still uncertainty surrounding the Commission's long-term vision and the potential consequences of participating or not participating. It is crucial for the Commission to provide a comprehensive and transparent outlook on these initiatives, enabling knowledge institutions to make informed decisions about their involvement.



IN-DEPTH LOOK

International collaboration

Regional centre for education and training (ROC) in Nijmegen is engaged in the development of a structural partnership with AlHussein Technical University (HTU) in Jordan/Amman. HTU, a university of applied sciences, focuses on vocational and higher education and seeks collaboration with programmes in the field of Technology, particularly IT, Engineering, Automotive, and Creative Technology. The partnership is centred around skill- and project-based learning, employability, and lifelong learning. It encompasses student assignments, projects, and internships, as well as job shadowing, guest lectures, and collaborative innovation for teachers. Recently, ROC Nijmegen conducted a productive working visit, leading both institutions to agree upon the formulation of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The collaboration will proceed through a capacity building application, which is scheduled for submission in 2024.

Zone College has made effective use of Erasmus+ funding to facilitate student participation in a capacity-building project focused on Aquaculture (commonly referred to as “fish farming”) in Indonesia. This endeavour yields multiple benefits:

- Students gain a distinctive international learning experience.
- Teachers can leverage and exchange their expertise with Indonesian counterparts.
- Indonesian vocational schools can further enhance their practical-oriented education through this initiative.

The background image shows an empty classroom. In the foreground, there are several rows of wooden chairs with slatted backs. The chairs are arranged in a tiered fashion, typical of a lecture hall or classroom. In the background, there is a white wall with a blackboard on the left, a speaker mounted on the wall, and a door on the right. The lighting is somewhat dim, and the overall atmosphere is quiet and empty.

IN-DEPTH LOOK

Simplification

When feasible simplification, while keeping the primary objectives in view, is more than welcome! What would undeniably aid is the avoidance of deploying tools that are non-functional. Previously, there existed a purported mobility tool intended for data storage, which initially proved ineffectual. Subsequently, after rectifying all the glitches and ensuring proper functionality, the program for the period 2013-2020 concluded, and the Beneficiary Module was introduced for the new period. However, up to the present day, it still remains non-functional. The European Commission persistently follows this pattern, where new initiatives are launched without adequate testing, only to be replaced by something new before they begin to function properly, once again perpetuating the cycle of dysfunctionality.



“The great potential of Erasmus+ to advance digitalisation, sustainability, and inclusion, can really only be realised when the programme gets simpler to use.”

Pieter Duisenberg
President of Universities
of the Netherlands (UNL)

III. Simplification and streamlining

Recommendations

- Make **simplification the new mantra** when designing the new Erasmus+ program
- Erasmus+ has become **more complex and bureaucratic. Take concrete measures** to reduce these burdens
- Streamline policy with practice by offering better **training and bigger responsibility to Erasmus+ National Agencies**

The new programming period has brought forth a range of fresh initiatives that have positively influenced Erasmus+. However, Neth-ER notes that compared to the previous period, Erasmus+ has become increasingly **complex and bureaucratic**, rendering it less accessible. Despite acknowledging the value of the introduced instruments, Erasmus+ 2021-2027 has fallen short of fulfilling the initial promise of being an ‘evolution, not revolution’.

The complexity of the programme is evident in the **heavy administrative burdens** placed on Key Actions 1 and 2 and the new instruments. These burdens arise partly from the need for new forms of proof to address the programme’s horizontal priorities, but also from tightening existing rules, such as automatic recognition. To also commensurate Erasmus+ with the REFIT-programme, it is necessary to simplify (or even remove) rules that do not contribute to the quality of the programme. This should be done in constant dialogue with experts. Additionally, proper **testing and piloting** is crucial when introducing new measures like top-ups and lump sums. Successful pilots, such as the European diploma label and legal status for alliances, can serve as valuable examples.


Concrete **simplification measures** can alleviate administrative burden. For instance, eliminating the distinction between several types of grants, such as internships or learning mobility, would streamline the process and prevent duplication of work. Addressing the well-known issues with the digital infrastructure of **Erasmus Without Papers** (EWP), the **European Student Card**, and

the **Beneficiary Module** is an obvious solution to reduce administrative burden. Throughout the development of these digital tools, a user-oriented perspective should always be prioritized. Moreover, investigating the possibility of accrediting not only the main applicant but the entire consortium within consortium applications is essential.

To better streamline policy with practice, it is crucial to provide **better general training** for Erasmus officers and National Agencies, accompanied by **clear communication about the interpretations of Erasmus+ initiatives**. The lack of standardized training leads to varying understandings of the programme’s rules, hindering its effectiveness. An example is the inconsistent interpretation of deadlines related to the EWP by the central bodies in Brussels.

During the ongoing Erasmus+ period, there has been a notable reallocation of resources towards central actions. However, it has become evident that the support provided for participation in these central actions is insufficient, resulting in a lack of capacity for effective engagement. Neth-ER stresses the need for **decentralized support, with a stronger role for the Erasmus+ National Agencies**, as their close ties with institutions ensures smoother communication and implementation

Furthermore, streamlining Erasmus+ to other European funding programmes, such as Horizon Europe and the European Structural Funds, is crucial. Thus, seeking and capitalizing on synergies remains a paramount objective for Neth-ER.



“ At The Hague University of Applied Sciences we strive to include different perspectives in our education and research. International cooperation in education and research leads to accelerated knowledge development. One example of a Erasmus+ project at THUAS that embodies this is iKudu, in which students, lecturers and researchers collaborate with their peers in South Africa, focussing on themes such as: equity and decolonization.

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Elisabeth Minnemann
Chair of the Executive
Board The Hague
University of Applied
Sciences

IV. Reciprocal and equal international cooperation

Recommendations

- Provide a vision regarding the **international dimension of Erasmus+** and its potential role in education diplomacy and the pursuit of strategic autonomy
- In light of the invasion of **Ukraine** it is imperative to consider how Erasmus+ can continue contributing to refugee integration in general
- Maintain an open and receptive stance towards cooperation with the **United Kingdom**. The association of **Switzerland** with the Erasmus+ program should be expedited without delay.

Neth-ER recognizes the significant potential of Erasmus+ in fostering educational cooperation beyond Europe with strategic partners. In the current programme period, the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) offers an avenue for the whole education sector to contribute to cooperation and capacity building outside Europe. However, there is a **distinct lack of vision** from the European Commission regarding Erasmus+ and its role in education diplomacy and the pursuit of strategic autonomy. Neth-ER also expresses disappointment regarding the absence of an education dimension in the Global Approach.

Neth-ER warmly welcomes the opportunities provided by Erasmus+ for higher and **vocational education institutions to engage in collaborative projects beyond European borders**. Particularly for vocational education, Neth-ER believes that further developing the potential of these initiatives is crucial. European vocational education can play a vital role in addressing the global skills shortage while simultaneously benefiting from valuable exchanges within these cooperative endeavours. Higher education institutions express satisfaction with the existing options available.

The ongoing invasion of **Ukraine** by Russia has underscored the urgency of contemplating the role of Erasmus+ in international cooperation. Bilateral ties with Russia and Erasmus+ alumni have

been severed, while measures have been taken to support integration of Ukrainian refugees. Looking ahead, it is imperative to consider how Erasmus+ can continue contributing to **refugee integration** in general. For example, by introducing additional funding streams in a programme focused on students (and Researchers) at risk. Reflection on utilizing Erasmus+ as a crisis response mechanism is also essential to prevent budget constraints for vital programme components.

The **United Kingdom**, as an important economic, political, and cultural partner of the European Union with an excellent education system, remains an enticing destination for European students seeking to pursue studies abroad. Should the United Kingdom, or its constituent countries such as Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, express a desire to associate with the Erasmus+ programme, it is crucial for the EU to maintain an open and receptive stance towards such cooperation.

Furthermore, Neth-ER advocates for the swift association of **Switzerland** with the Erasmus+ programme. Switzerland, as a significant partner of the European Union and the Netherlands, boasts a high-quality education system. Facilitating Swiss participation in Erasmus+ would strengthen educational ties and foster cooperation between the EU and Switzerland, benefiting both parties involved.

Neth-ER is the Brussels based association of eleven Dutch organisations working in the field of research, innovation, and education. They are:

ISO - Dutch National Student Association

JOB - Union of Vocational Students

KNAW - Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences

LSVb - Dutch National Student Union

MBO Raad - Netherlands Association of Vocational Education Colleges

NFU - Netherlands Federation of University Medical Centres

Nuffic - Netherlands organisation for the internationalisation of education

NWO - Dutch Research Council

TNO - Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research

UNL - Universities of the Netherlands

VH - Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences



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