

Evidence-based approach in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps

Warsaw seminar 2021

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Editors' note

This book is a collection of research articles that were presented at the research seminar “Evidence-based approach in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps. Research in the time of pandemic”, that took place online on 27 October 2021 as part of the annual Warsaw Research Seminars. We are very glad that the Warsaw Research Seminars, launched in 2017, are becoming a fixed event on European Youth and Education Research and Policy calendar. As it was aimed originally, it brings together quality research on the Erasmus+ programme, providing evidence for other researchers, practitioners and policy-makers alike. It also remains as a unique event that covers all dimensions and actions of the Erasmus+ programme, gathering research focusing both on education and youth dimensions.

Despite all the challenges and setbacks that the COVID-19 pandemic created, the organising team of the Warsaw Research Seminars was aware of the importance of research and continuing provision of evidence on the functioning and impact of the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Fund. In fact, it was evident for us that, in these challenging times, we needed research more than ever in order to fully describe and understand the potential and visible impact of the pandemic on education and youth, as well as the society. Therefore, the 2021 edition was specially focused on the theme: “Research in the time pandemic”.

The research findings that were presented at the 2021 seminar were exceptionally high in quality and had a very wide scope. This gave us confidence that we were on the right track: researchers were in action at local, national and European levels; studying the impact of the pandemic and offering quality insights on what was going on. It was to our regret that we were constrained by the subject matter itself, the pandemic, preventing us from having a residential three-day event due to travel restrictions and health and safety concerns. Therefore, we were obliged to host the event online. On the one hand, it limited the programme to one day, reducing significantly the number of research we could host. However, on the other hand, it allowed us to stream it online, making it accessible to researchers, practitioners and policy-makers from all around Europe to attend and follow the presentations. We were impressed with the numbers of audience in sessions, which clearly demonstrated the need and the demand for quality research findings on the pandemic and education and youth.

This book is also driven by the demand we have witnessed; the research presented in the seminar is now available in print and online versions for audiences over time and space. We sincerely hope that this collection of articles will contribute to the work of researchers, practitioners and policy-makers all around Europe and beyond. Therefore, we also kindly ask you to feel free

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to share the publication with all those who you think would benefit from one or several of the articles.

The structure of the book is designed in a manner organising the presented research findings in time order. It starts with the article by Hilde Kletzl, which offers general personal reflections on how the pandemic affected the work of HE and VET schools during the pandemic and on Erasmus mobility in the case of Austria. It is followed by the article by Tamara Kostić and Selena Lazić on the impact of mobility projects for Serbian participants. This study was launched just before the pandemic and was finalised at the outbreak of the pandemic. In this context, it is in line with the article of Janina Meyer that analyses the impacts of Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships in adult education sector in Germany, which is a study launched before the pandemic and similarly, was completed at the outbreak of the pandemic.

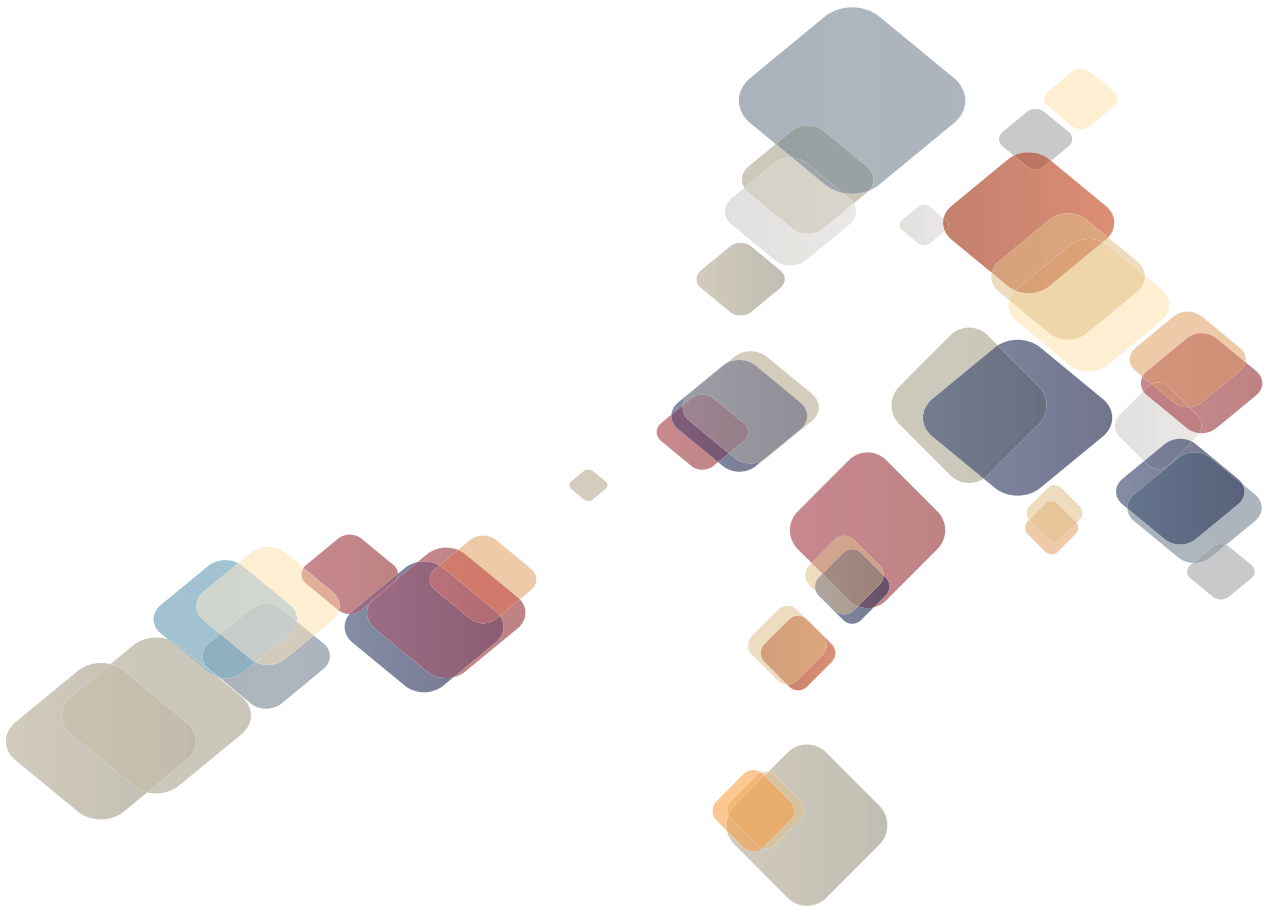
The book then continues with articles that present findings of research conducted at the time of the pandemic and the impact of it on different aspects: Jadwiga Fila analyses Erasmus project sustainability during the pandemic with the aim to check to what extent the competences of projects' leaders might influence the implementation of international projects. Next, we have the findings of the transnational RAY-CORONA research, written by Andrea Horta Herranz, Andreas Karsten, Ashley Pitschmann, and Tanja Strecker, focusing on how the projects and the learning mobility formats have responded to the pandemic. Asuman Göksel's research on youth work in Turkey and the impact of the pandemic is also an important country analysis that focuses on youth work practice. The research by Ewa Krzaklewska and Karolina Podgórska offers insights on the experience of online education of Erasmus+ students in the case of Poland. The case analysis continues with Armenia, written by Marina Galstyan, which concentrates on pandemic conditions, challenges and effects on education system in Armenian schools. The findings refer to Armenia, but there have been issues observed which to some extent may also exist in other countries, and the Erasmus+ programme may be a good source of support to the needs of schools that were revealed during the pandemic.

The book ends with the chapter titled "Priorities for the new Erasmus+ programme in pandemic times: insights, challenges and strategies within the transition to the new programme 2021–2027" written by Margarida Cardoso, Sofia Soeiro and Cláudia Teixeira Gomes. The article by the colleagues representing the Portuguese National Agency for the Erasmus+ Education and Training, which focuses on the priorities of the new Erasmus+ programme, is meaningful for the next edition of the Warsaw Research Seminar. The 2022 edition is designed to put emphasis on this very important issue: the priorities of the new programme. In addition to the change of focus,

we are planning a format change as well. The seminar will be more in the nature of a workshop and roundtable, aiming to bring practice and research closer together. The main question for the participants will be on how to plan, design and implement the research on each of the priority areas. The outcome will also be different; rather than a book like the one you are holding in your hands, it is planned to create an online toolkit that will contribute to the research, making it more accessible and inclusive for policy-making and practices alike.

We would like to thank all the participants of the 2021 Warsaw Research Seminar and all those who have contributed to this edited volume. We believe their contributions are crucial for improving the youth and education practice and will create a significant impact by reaching diverse audiences. We would also like to express our gratitude to the colleagues in the FRSE that work with ever increasing motivation and commitment for the Warsaw Research Seminar series. Through their hard work, the success and the reach of the seminars are growing steadily each year.

Agnieszka Rybińska
Özgehan Şenyuva
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Erasmus mobility – in what ways has the pandemic affected different age groups? Individual reflection on implementation of Erasmus projects in Austria

By Hilde Kletzl

1. Introduction

Not all Erasmus mobilities have been affected in the same way and to the same extent by the pandemic. The following text looks at the effects the pandemic had on different age groups and institutions and relies on the personal observations of the author concerning the following: university students and university staff, upper secondary schools – general and vocational education, again students and staff. Erasmus mobility for adults and long-term stays were at a clear advantage. The following article is looking at examples and tries to give reasons why long-term stays and Erasmus mobilities with more senior target groups were more resilient than others. The article gives individual examples, which are based on personal experience, interviews and feedback from schools and the University of Pedagogy Salzburg. It gives a portrait of the local situation, but some examples may well correlate with Erasmus mobility outside Austria.

2. What happened to university students and their mobility in the early stages of lockdown?

In March 2020, Erasmus students had already arrived in Austria for the summer semester before the first lockdown (on 13 March 2020). Financially this meant that the students had started their mobility abroad and could get their grant without any further problems. In reality, however, it meant uncertainty for exchange students. Online studies at Austrian Universities were announced for a month initially and then they were extended for a full summer semester. Erasmus students completed their studies online with most of them from their respective home countries. Many found themselves in their teenage bedrooms at their family home paying for student accommodation in Austria at the same time. The overwhelming majority of students could not cancel student accommodation in Austria as they had signed contracts for a full semester.

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KEYWORDS

age groups, effects of pandemic in schools, travel restrictions for schools, university research in pandemic times, mobilities in VET

I was teaching a group of Erasmus students at the University of Pedagogy Salzburg at the time. The Erasmus participants came from various European backgrounds: Spain, UK, Greece, Cyprus, Luxembourg, etc. The experience of the online course was mixed as on the one hand, students were glad to be given a perspective and being able to complete their programme without further problems but on the other hand, they felt their true Erasmus experience had been taken away from them as they were working from their home town desks once more. Especially, students from the UK felt bereft, as they knew this was the last chance before Brexit. On top of that some students had financial problems and took up part-time jobs, for instance in a supermarket. These side jobs caused problems with keeping set online course times.

Especially in the first phase of online teaching, the differences in media and digital literacy in the various countries became apparent. Digital competence, hardware and software resources of university students were extremely heterogenic (Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2020, p. 83). In the rather limited viewpoint of a group of twelve students, it became apparent that students from the UK seemed to have more trouble in a digital setting than students from Greece. UK students had the necessary hardware and software for online courses but their digital competences were on a rather low level. They had little prior training concerning online communication: they found it hard to distinguish between private communication (between sender and writer only) and open public communication. That seemed particularly problematic, as those students were close to completing their teacher training courses.

For teachers, sensitivity for open and closed communication is vital: open and undistinguished communication can turn into violation of a pupil's privacy. For instance, a teacher cannot give feedback on a pupil's work and post it online in such a way that all the fellow pupils in a class can access it. In this particular course for teacher trainees, it took weeks to make them aware of these differences in posting information in a forum or a closed chat, addressing only a relevant readership and keeping rules of discretion at the same time. These digital competences have become extremely relevant for teachers in online teaching.

The University of Pedagogy Salzburg supported the Erasmus+ programme and accepted smaller groups in teaching. Winter semester 2020 meant extremely low numbers in incoming and outgoing students and a large number of last minute cancellations. This applied in particular to students from the UK as this was the last semester under Erasmus+ terms before Brexit was about to commence. A large number of UK students applied and were eager to go abroad. At the University of Pedagogy Salzburg, applications from the UK partner university tripled for the final year 2019/2020. In the winter semester 2020/2021 Salzburg welcomed 28 UK students, 3325 students from Germany (often daily commuters) and 69 from Spain¹. In 2018, the number of incomings from Spain and the UK were about the same according to the IHS study (Kluge et al., 2018, p. 12). For the Erasmus+ application process of the University of Pedagogy Salzburg and its partners, the applicants generally give a choice of three countries they would consider for their mobility. Many chose Austria as one of the three in winter 2020 and Austria is often not the first choice in the application process – the application documents of the applicants are sent to Salzburg. Austria is usually the country of the second or third choice. There are various reasons why Austria is not a “hot” choice for Erasmus mobilities. Austria cannot compete with warmer climates, beach images and hip and young urban destinations and therefore more incoming students in Salzburg apply for the winter semester with a large share from Spain. This observation is based on the experience with incoming students at the University of Pedagogy Salzburg in a timeframe of ten years. Language is another key factor in the choice of destination: Erasmus study is easier in a country whose language the applicant is familiar with. In the IHS report 2018 an overwhelming majority of incomings in Austria

¹ Statistik Austria: Ausländische ordentliche Studierende an öffentlichen Universitäten im Wintersemester 2020/21 nach Staatsbürgerschaft, bit.ly/3wX9Byb [access 10.03.2022].

came from Germany and Italy followed with much lower numbers. The study does not distinguish between the German speaking part in northern Italy and the rest of the country². Strong Austrian regional accents do not make life easy for those who study German as a foreign language. Therefore, applicants with knowledge of the German language prefer Germany rather than Austria. However, Erasmus students in Austria usually find a much younger community and more innovation than they had initially expected. They also love Austria for its central location in Europe and its great transportation systems.

In the winter semester 2020, many students withdrew Erasmus applications at the last minute for various reasons: extra costs for flights, cheap flights were harder to find, extra costs for student lodgings – proprietors mainly offered only leases for a full semester. In some cases home universities had also changed regulations for studies and internships and practical courses. Therefore, students feared they might be losing necessary credits if they were stuck abroad without any option of going back to their home university for writing an exam, for instance. I taught in Erasmus courses of the International Office at the University of Pedagogy Salzburg for several years. There were always students from abroad who went back to their home countries for an extended weekend to take exams with their home institutions. This applied more so for students from neighbouring countries who could take a train or a car to go home. For these students it meant they could continue their study plans without falling back behind in the study programmes of their home institutions and benefiting from Erasmus abroad at the same time. With travel restrictions, these advantages of Austria's central location in Europe were gone.

The pandemic also put the financial resources of university students and their families in focus. Those who could rely on financial help from their families would rather risk a mobility and study abroad than those from a less wealthy background. Kai Maas from the Leibnitz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation (DIPF) points this out for the school context but it is also true for university students³. Erasmus scholarships offer only financial support and provide funds to cover additional costs of studying abroad. In reality, many participants exceed the budget they had planned on and families needed to give financial support. Actual costs are also less foreseeable in pandemic times.

3. Outlook – universities

In spring 2021 university students were optimistic enough again to apply for an Erasmus mobility. In most European countries, in spring time vaccinations were available on a wide scale to vulnerable persons, and in the summer also to young and healthy university students. This made young people optimistic and for the winter semester 2021 a larger number of students from abroad also arrived in Austria. However, universities were forced into distance learning once more in mid-November 2021. This put a damper on the Erasmus experience in Austria, as many universities in southern European countries were not hit by the Delta wave as hard and as early as mid-November. Nevertheless, vaccinations helped to make travelling less chaotic and quarantines less likely. Mobilities for university students will pick up and universities have the means to support them. There is staff to organise mobilities and to manage Erasmus projects. Erasmus projects need experienced staff not only to set up applications, but also to organise and run projects over years.

Austrian universities have the experience and the staff to handle large budgets, whereas Austrian schools have mainly teaching staff and schools are extremely understaffed for administrative affairs. For example,

² Cf. footnote above.

³ Cf. Maaz, K. (2022). *Wie Corona die Schwächen des Schulsystems offenlegt*, bit.ly/3LYg28K [access 27.01.2022] and Schmidberger, V., Biegger, S. (2022). *Sechs Lehren aus zwei Jahren Pandemie*. Tagesschau.de, bit.ly/3z70bC2 [access 27.01.2022].

the HTBLuVA Salzburg is a school with more than 2,000 students, 250 teachers and 6 people to get the office work done. A university of the same size would have ten times as much administrative staff, at least. The university budget for KA1 Erasmus+ was for 2021 more than fifteen million euro. In comparison, Austrian schools received less than five million euro, a third of what universities could rely on⁴. Austrian schools could get a higher share in Erasmus+ budgets but they lack the resources to handle the projects and therefore never apply for the available resources.

4. University research and staff mobility

The situation for scientific research and related travel for university staff was difficult and only possible in a rather limited period in October and November 2021. International cooperation is to some extent possible in video conferences, but the limitations are strong. In many research projects, video conferences are a bridge technology to keep relations alive. In Austria, staff at universities are formally no longer civil servants but regulations concerning international travel go back to a system with civil servants. This means that staff need to apply to the ministry in Vienna to get official permission to travel for work related purposes. Generally applications need to be handed in four weeks before the actual trip. In COVID times this period was extended and professional trips need a formal application eight weeks in advance. The pandemic has made travelling more difficult and less plannable, especially in the long term. These new regulations are in fact restrictions on staff interaction on an international level. In the period of January 2021 to June 2021 travelling was completely forbidden for university staff and permissions were not given. This permission from the ministry is necessary for staff and only then they are entitled to payment and insurance. Permissions are often issued just a few days before the trip and travel arrangements need to be made before, assuming that permissions will not be denied. If the permission is not given, then the initial professional trip turns into a private arrangement at the scientist's own risk or the scientist cancels the trip entirely.

For example, at the University of Pedagogy Salzburg the Erasmus+ financed research project "Framing CLIL" extended its running time by another year. Team meetings were mostly online and face-to-face meetings were scarce since the beginning of the pandemic. In fact, there was another try to have a face-to-face meeting in November 2021. Unfortunately, this meeting to close the project was cancelled and replaced in the online format. Not only communication between international colleagues was affected, but also communication amongst colleagues in Austria was online. This particular project depends on close cooperation with schools. Testing the developed software in a school setting is vital but was limited during the pandemic. Thus, the pandemic had effects on mobilities but of course, even more so, on Erasmus financed research as a whole⁵. This particular project – "Framing CLIL" was run by Manchester University and the University of Pedagogy Salzburg was a partner. In this case, Brexit is particularly negative, as the project cannot continue with the same leader. Changing the leader and nominating a partner in this position is a complicated process and takes personal interaction. As there were no personal meetings in the last two years, the project is not likely to be continued.

⁴ Budgetverteilung Erasmus+ in Österreich für das Antragsjahr 2021. Erasmus OEAD, bit.ly/3z8Ab9m [online 15.01.2022].

⁵ Huber et al. (2019) and mmu.ac.uk [access 30.01.2022].

5. Schools – what happened to their mobilities

As of March 2020 and all of 2021 the pandemic put a complete hold on school mobilities in Austria. Even though the number of COVID infections were low both in June 2020 and June 2021, schools were banned by law from organising school trips within Austria and needless to point out, also abroad. Clearly, information about COVID and the pandemic was limited in 2020 and school lawmakers were extremely careful and surprisingly continued so in June 2021, when life outside schools was normal and vaccinations were available. There was only a short period in September, October and November 2021 when schools were given permission to organise school trips with students. Only some dared to organise trips within Austria, but putting Erasmus into action and booking flights for a group of school kids was a risk hardly anyone would take.

An example is the BAfEP Graz, a school that trains future kindergarten teachers and has a longstanding cooperation with a partner organisation in France. The school in Graz benefits from Erasmus mobilities and their kindergarten trainees can get experience in preschool education in France.

Mobilities for underage students came to a complete stop in spring 2020 and all of 2021. School groups were not allowed to travel and the French partners were hesitant to open vulnerable preschool institutions to foreign visitors. The BAfEP Graz only managed to send a group of adult college students to France for a study experience abroad in November 2021⁶. The BAfEP College is a special stream for adults from various professional backgrounds and provides special trainings to become a kindergarten teacher even later in life. The BAfEP managed to restart its programme again but made a vaccination for the participants a prerogative⁷. Many other institutions and schools have still their Erasmus budget and the contract that has been extended in time by the NAs but partnerships have been lost on a personal level.

Generally, the financial support in Erasmus+ is smaller for schools than for universities⁸. The financial frame for mobilities in the Austrian school context leaves little room for changing budgets and changing flight costs. The budget per pupil is tight even in times of a competitive market of air travel with low budget carriers⁹. The daily allowance KA1 for Austrian pupils for 2022 is 64 euro in DK, NO and 48 euro in Estonia. Teachers get 106 euro and 83 euro respectively to cover costs for accommodation, food and local travel. These amounts only apply for short stays of up to two weeks. For longer stays amounts are reduced by 30%. The German National Agency had the same amounts for students in 2021 but much higher allowances for the staff in schools with 144 euro and 112 euro¹⁰. German allowances for staff are almost by 50% higher, even though Germany and Austria are comparable in the standard of living. Austria wanted to support schools by splitting the given budget into an extremely high number of mobilities but lower budgets per capita.

In Austria, there is no specific staff dedicated to handle Erasmus+ in the schools. Typically, school teachers handle Erasmus projects as a side job and in most cases in their free time. Erasmus+ requires trained staff to manage a project well and it takes time and work. In comparison, Austrian Universities and adult education providers, eg. Wifi, BFI are in a much better position to successfully apply for available Erasmus resources, and to manage Erasmus projects. This is also a reason why universities get a much bigger share out of the Erasmus+ budget, they ask for it. Only VET-schools have some help with providers outside schools who manage the financial aspect of mobilities: Ready4Europe, IFA, YoungStyria, are examples.

⁶ Cf. telephone interview with Renate Sauer (BAfEP headmistress) on 26 January 2022 [access 26.01.2022].

⁷ Cf. footnote before.

⁸ erasmusplus.at [access 5.01.2022].

⁹ erasmusplus.at [access 25.01.2022].

¹⁰ erasmusplus.schule [access 25.01.2022].

Table 1. Daily allowance for Austrian schools 2022 (students/staff)

	Destination countries		Students		Staff and attendants	
			Day 1–14	Day 15–365	Day 1–14	Day 15–365
Country group 1	DK	Denmark	€ 64	€ 45	€ 106	€ 74
	FI	Finland				
	IS	Iceland				
	IE	Ireland				
	LI	Liechtenstein				
	LU	Luxembourg				
	NO	Norway				
	SE	Sweden				
Country group 2	AT	Austria	€ 56	€ 39	€ 94	€ 66
	BE	Belgium				
	CY	Cyprus				
	FR	France				
	DE	Germany				
	EL	Greece				
	IT	Italy				
	MT	Malta				
	NL	Netherlands				
	PT	Portugal				
	ES	Spain				
	Country group 3	BG				
HR		Croatia				
CZ		Czechia				
EE		Estonia				
HU		Hungary				
LV		Latvia				
LT		Lithuania				
MK		North Macedonia				
PL		Poland				
RO		Romania				
SRB		Serbia				
SK		Slovakia				
SL		Slovenia				
TR		Turkey				

Source: erasmusplus.at [access 25.01.2022].

Table 2. Daily allowances for German schools 2021 (staff, students)

Destination countries	Staff mobility (subsidy per day)	Students mobility (subsidy per day)
Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden	€ 144	€ 64
Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain	€ 128	€ 56
Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey	€ 112	€ 48

Source: *erasmusplus.schule* [access 25.01.2022].

The times of easy, cheap travel might be over and may make some financial limitations on Erasmus mobilities actually turn into huge obstacles. Erasmus+ budgets – especially in the school context – should be adapted soon and allowances for travel should be higher and more flexible. Travel allowances for trips below 100km with 23 euro do not seem realistic (a two-way train ticket for about 15km is about this amount in Austria). In reality, parents need to top up budgets for Erasmus mobilities. Since Erasmus+ started, costs for travel were organised in categories, depending on the distance. What seems fair and transparent at first glance, is in fact rather unfair at second glance. This system supports schools, staff, and universities that are centrally located at urban areas with good transport connections. Schools from rural areas might in fact may use half the travel allowance just getting to the airport because there is only a private airport shuttle that picks them up at three o'clock in the morning to get to the airport to catch that flight at 9.00. For those in town that flight at 9.00 may mean just an extra ticket for the underground service. In Austria this means that schools in Vienna can probably get by with 180 euro, that is the usual category for Austria. For a school in Tyrol 400 km away from Vienna's airport, the same allowance is by far not realistic. Equal does not always mean fair, especially if a country has regions with different levels of infrastructure.

6. Vocational schools and internships

Schools have been most affected by COVID, as many exchanges are short term and regulations for school groups and underage students have left no room for Erasmus mobilities. Erasmus mobilities during the school year are usually one week or two weeks and may include holidays. The reason is that in the strict structure of the Austrian school system, students cannot miss more than one or two weeks of teaching time. Austrian teachers are also limited as to the amount of time they are permitted to go on school trips in a year with three weeks maximum. Therefore, schools usually plan short-term mobilities and these mobilities are particularly vulnerable in pandemic times. The cost of travel is a much larger share in the mobility budget than for longer stays. The schedules for shorter trips tend to be packed with events and keeping the timeline

is important for the success of the short trip. In pandemic times, such schedules are disrupted and meetings are postponed or cancelled. Even before the pandemic, the participants of longer stays abroad showed more satisfaction than those with shorter stays (Korkala, 2019, p. 124).

Vocational schools (VET) compared to other types of schools in Austria offer longer mobilities for their students. The vocational schools have a system of work placements and internships abroad. Most VET schools include a job placement in the curriculum and students need to work four to eight weeks with a company to complete their educational plan. Austrian VET-students are expected to get these placements organised without much help and support from the schools. These placements are usually in Austria and Austrian companies have longstanding experience with the system. Placements abroad are nowadays also accepted by schools. As students are expected to complete these internships or job placements outside school, they would have been possible in pandemic times. These VET-mobilities usually last two to four weeks. In the summers 2020 and 2021 VET-mobilities were extremely reduced in numbers as there was no sense in risking a 10-day quarantine for a four-week stay. Long-term stays were clearly of advantage and this will remain if travel regulations are not made any simpler and alike for all EU member states. The school programmes are gradually coming back but there is a lot of red tape and this varies from country to country. Job placements are usually individual and not in groups. Therefore, a placement is not a school trip, usually takes place in the summer holidays and regulations are less strict. After the first COVID wave in 2020, teachers at vocational schools were hopeful and tried to organise mobilities for internships. For the summers 2020 and 2021 it was almost impossible to find partners who were willing to welcome individual students in COVID times even if those pupils were of age. Typically, students are 18 years old and in their final year at their upper secondary school. In the past two years, many schools just put their programmes on hold. These partners are often companies and after two years of the pandemic, they are more willing to offer work placements, especially in the IT sector, as they are often understaffed in IT. Mobilities for students from vocational schools for IT and technology are less and less attractive as Austrian companies offer extremely attractive placements to VET students with competitive pay. Thus, many Austrian upper secondary students in vocational schools stay home, find connections locally and get straight into job life after school. For example, Ready4Europe is an Erasmus project that helps vocational students with Erasmus mobilities for work placements and they finance mobilities. They lost three quarters of their former mobilities during the pandemic¹¹.

7. Further effects on schools

Language teaching assistants from the UK or the US were not available for language support during the pandemic. In fact, Brexit has made it harder for teaching assistants from the UK to get into continental Europe. They need a work permit and a visa, just like US teaching assistants from Fulbright always did. It seems Brexit has a rather strange double effect on the teaching assistants programme. Clearly, a visa etc. has made life for UK teaching assistants harder but the programme is suddenly immensely attractive because Erasmus+ is no longer an option in the UK. Thus, UK university students see the teaching assistant programme as an alternative to Erasmus+, even though it means putting university study on hold for a year or at least a semester. Teaching assistants work at a school and cannot generally continue their study at the same time. An exception are those students who are in teacher training programmes – for them a semester of teaching can mean extra job experience they need for their study at their UK university. For US teaching assistants life

¹¹ Cf. Telephone interview with AV DI Rudolf Razka (ready4Europe representative); facebook.com/ready4europe [online 21.01.2022].

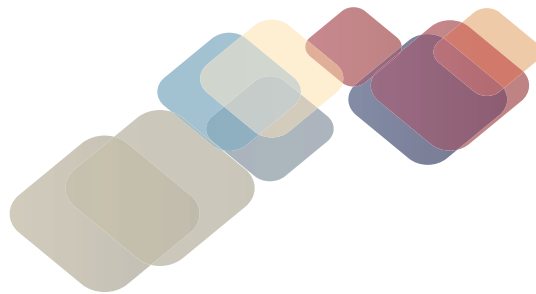
was particularly hard in spring 2020. They should leave Europe within a few days, but surprisingly in autumn 2020 and in 2021, US teaching assistants could go to Austria whereas Austrians were not given permission to travel to the US up until November 2021.

8. General outlook at the beginning of 2022

Schools are still under pressure in the third year of the pandemic. In Austrian schools general distance learning stopped in spring 2021. There are regular tests for COVID infections, which help detect them in time, before they become clusters. For the individual student and the teachers COVID screenings mean stress, as no one knows whose turn it is next to be “positive”. A positive test result means, that the student is sent home immediately to be PCR tested. If that result is positive, then the student and most likely the whole family are affected by the 10-day quarantine rule. This is an extremely stressful situation for school students. They all have experience with friends and classmates being sent home at an instance. Younger learners and also teenagers are affected most by the pandemic and stress related illnesses, depression etc. increase¹². At the same time, face-to-face teaching in schools is extremely valuable and no online system can replace it.

Universities in Austria have moved to online teaching in October 2021 for the winter semester, and work is much more consistent and plannable compared to the situation in schools. Face-to-face teaching in schools hangs on the COVID test results. If more students are tested positive the whole group changes into the online mode within one day. The system is stressful for school staff and pupils as it lacks stability even though the rigid testing system should ensure stability in school life¹³.

Mobilities could give a new perspective to schools and universities. Going abroad could give back some of the freedom that the pandemic has made us give up. School exchanges are worth the hassle and might even be a tool in the school environment to bring some of the normal social interaction back. Erasmus+ support and funding is there which is a good indication that schools will start exchanges again, with support offered by institutions experienced in Erasmus+ implementation.



¹² Mehr Jugendliche mit depressiven Symptomen (2021). tagesschau.de. [bit.ly/3NTdw4M](https://www.tagesschau.de/bit.ly/3NTdw4M) [access 23.01.2022].

¹³ Zum dritten Mal in einer Chaos-Situation (2022). tagesschau.de. [bit.ly/3x5Y1Qf](https://www.tagesschau.de/bit.ly/3x5Y1Qf) [access 23.01.2022].

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Impact analysis of mobility projects in School Education and VET sector for Serbian participants: methodological approach and survey results

By Tamara Kostić, Selena Lazić

1. Introduction

The Republic of Serbia is a country associated with the Erasmus+ programme and the Foundation Tempus is an organisation that promotes, implements and evaluates the programme in the Republic of Serbia. It acts as the link between the European Commission and participating organisations at local, regional, and national levels. To promote the programme at the national level, Foundation Tempus provides relevant information for applicants, presents the possibilities and effects of EU programmes and offers applicants professional support and advice.

The annual impact survey is an integral part of monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the Erasmus+ programme. The impact analysis is an established practice at Foundation Tempus which involves analysis and evaluation of mobility projects in school education (KA101 mobility projects) and VET sector (KA102 mobility projects) with the aim to assess the extent to which the expected outcomes of these projects have been achieved. Mobility activities under Key Action 1 are expected to bring positive and long-lasting effects on the participants and participating organisations involved, as well as on the wider policy systems. Some of the expected outcomes for students include improved learning performance, improved foreign language and digital competences, enhanced intercultural awareness and improved career prospects. When it comes to staff and professionals involved in education and training, expected outcomes include improved competencies linked to their occupational profile, greater understanding, and responsiveness to diversity, improved foreign language and digital competencies¹.

Thus, the mobility impact survey aims to examine different effects that mobility activities under Key Action 1 have on students and staff within the sectors of school and vocational education and training. As Foundation

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KEYWORDS

impact analysis, mobility projects, school education, VET

¹ European Commission (2019). *Erasmus+ Programme Guide*, Version 2: 15.01.2019. Downloaded from bit.ly/3aaaR8t [access 30.05.2022].

Tempus also provides support to project applicants and participating organisations throughout the project life cycle and does this partly by organising different events throughout the year, an additional part of the impact analysis is the annual evaluation of the events.

The focus of this article will be the impact analysis of mobility projects that took place during the school year 2019/2020. The methodology of the survey will be presented first, followed by the survey findings and discussion.

2. Methodology

2.1. Procedure

The impact survey was conducted in November and December 2020, with the main objective to assess various aspects of mobility's impact. Data were collected through an online questionnaire that was sent to all individuals who went on a mobility during the 2019/2020 school year. Participants came from the sectors of school education (KA101) and vocational education and training – VET (KA102).

Collected data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Descriptive and frequency analyses have been used for closed questions and in case of open-ended questions, answers have been categorized and thematic analysis has been conducted.

2.2. Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of 30 items. Most of them were closed (single and multiple-choice) questions, but some were open-ended. The questionnaire was anonymous, and it was open for 2 weeks online. The attitudes were measured on a Likert scale.

The first section of the questionnaire was used to collect data about participants (their institution, position, previous experience in similar projects, primary motivation for participation) and their mobility (destination country, activities carried out during mobility and duration of mobility). Other sections were designed to collect data about the competencies participants developed during their mobility placement, the activities they carried out to disseminate the acquired knowledge after returning to Serbia and different effects that mobility had on them. Overall satisfaction with the project was also examined and participants were asked to give their comments and suggestions for improvement.

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3. Survey sample

Sample structure

The sample consisted of a total of 118 participants – 29 participants of KA101 mobility and 89 participants of KA102 mobility. Response rate differed between the two subsamples – for KA101 participants, it was 66%, whereas for KA102 participants it was 41%. Numbers of participants who have received a questionnaire and numbers of those who responded are presented in the table 1.

Table 1. Response rate

	Number of sent emails	Number of responses	Response rate
KA101	44	29	66%
KA102	217	89	41%

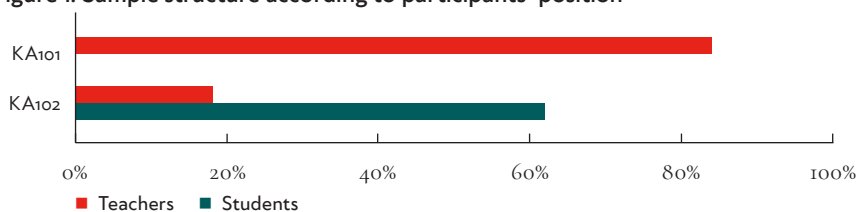
Most participants in both subsamples were females and the age structure also differs – most of KA101 mobility participants are older than 36, and around 80% of KA102 mobility participants are younger than 26. Detailed structure of the sample by gender, age and the position in participants' institutions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Sample structure according to age and gender

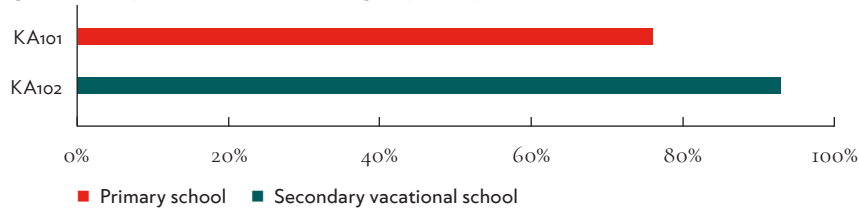
Variables	KA101 (n = 29)	KA102 (n = 89)
Gender	Women (79%)	Women (57%)
Age	36 and older (93%)	26 and younger (78%)

Different age structure between the two subsamples is understandable, having in mind different positions of participants of the two subsamples: KA101 mobility participants are mostly teachers (83,6% of the subsample), whereas the majority of KA102 mobility participants are students (62%). When it comes to the institutions that participants come from, KA101 mobility participants are mostly employed in primary schools (76%) and KA102 mobility participants mostly come from secondary vocational schools (93%). The structure of the sample according to participants' position and institution, is presented in the Figure 1 and Figure 2².

Figure 1. Sample structure according to participants' position



² Low frequencies are omitted from both figures.

Figure 2. Sample structure according to participants' institution

To better understand the structure of the sample in terms of the institution the participants come from, it is worth explaining shortly how the education system in Serbia is organised. The early childhood education and care (ECEC) consists of three levels: nursery (for children aged 6 months to 3 years), kindergarten (for children aged 3–5.5 years) and preschool preparatory programme classes (for children over 5.5 years of age) which is mandatory for all children. Primary school is also mandatory and lasts 8 years (consisting of 8 school grades). Secondary school in Serbia is non-mandatory and lasts from three to four years (grades). Students usually enter secondary school at the age of 15, upon completion of primary school. There are two forms of secondary education in Serbia – general and vocational. General secondary education in Serbia lasts four years. Upon completing it, students do not receive vocational qualification and usually pursue higher education qualifications. The most common form of general secondary education are general grammar schools (also known as gymnasiums) that last 4 years and offer general education, usually followed by application to a higher education institution. In addition, there are also specialized grammar schools, intended for education of talented students in certain areas³. Vocational secondary education in Serbia lasts 3 or 4 years and offers primarily specialized education. Each school or programme is focused on a specific field of study. After completing this type of education, students receive vocational qualification, but they can apply to higher education as well after completing 4-year secondary education⁴.

When it comes to the activities within the mobility project, most of the participants in the field of school education attended courses (16 out of 29) or benefitted from job shadowing (12 out of 29), whereas most of participants in VET sector completed on-the-job training that included job shadowing (75% of them).

When it comes to the destination country, KA101 project participants mostly implemented their mobility in Scotland, Italy, and Finland, while most KA102 participants went on mobility to Greece (34 out of 89 participants), followed by Bulgaria and Portugal (15 participants for each country). Mobility duration varied between 4 and 15 days on average, but it should be considered that mobility is shorter on average for KA101 projects compared to KA102 projects.

Most of respondents didn't have any previous mobility experience – 93% of participants from the field of school education and 90% participants from VET. Participants from the field of school education emphasized that their primary motive for mobility was to develop their professional competencies as well as to make connections and exchange experience with their colleagues abroad, whereas VET participants additionally highlighted the motivation to acquire soft skills.

³ There are four specialized grammar schools in Serbia: Mathematical gymnasium, Philological gymnasium, Gymnasium specializing in Physics and Gymnasium specializing in ICT Sciences.

⁴ Eurydice, bit.ly/3xoWbl3 [access 30.05.2022].

4. Survey findings: the impact of mobility projects

To assess the participants' mobility experience and its impact, it is important to examine the competences they developed during mobility, the ways in which they apply these in their work as well as forms of dissemination they implemented.

The first question that was asked regarding the participants' mobility experience was: "Describe what experience you gained during the mobility (you can describe which skills and what knowledge you acquired, which attitudes you adopted during the mobility period etc.)". This general and open-ended question was an opportunity for participants to give various answers and map out their whole experience. The answers were analyzed qualitatively, by categorizing them into two groups. The first group of answers was described as key competences⁵ because the answers were based on transversal and interdisciplinary sets of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, or, more often, named as actual key competences or cross-curricular competences defined in The Bylaw on Standards of General Cross-curricular Competences in the End of Secondary Education⁶. The second group of answers was described as concrete skills. The examples of answers are presented in the boxes below.

Specific skills (KA101 participants):

- the skill of programming Arduino robots
- the skill of using 3D printer

Key competences (KA102 participants):

- foreign language communication
- teamwork
- cooperation
- problem solving
- critical thinking

Key competences (KA101 participants):

- foreign language communication
- using digital technologies
- problem solving
- managing projects
- interpersonal competences

Specific skills (KA102):

- working with knife
- making "baklava"
- working with airplane radio equipment
- food vacuuming
- wine production

⁵ European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2019). *Key competences for lifelong learning*. Luxembourg: Publications Office; bit.ly/3wZoNLd [access 30.05.2022].

⁶ The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (2013). *Bylaw on Standards of General Cross-curricular Competences in the End of Secondary Education* [Standardi opštih medupredmetnih kompetencija za kraj srednjeg obrazovanja]; bit.ly/3PQZT88 [access 30.05.2022].

There are some differences in qualitative responses between two groups of mobility participants regarding their experiences and developed competences. KA101 project participants stated that the most important competences are digital competences, especially in teaching, as well as methodological competences, and competences relevant to inclusive practice working with gifted children or those who require additional support, followed by improvement of foreign language, teamwork, and organisational skills. KA102 project participants mostly emphasize that their focus was on acquiring specific professional skills (more than KA101 project participants), as well as key competences such as communication, teamwork, critical thinking, etc.

When it comes to the types of activities, 55.2% of KA101 participants attended courses and 41.4% took part in job shadowing. Only 3.4% of them had a teaching assignment. On the other hand, 76.1% of KA102 participants attended courses and job shadowing while the rest of them had a teaching or training assignment.

Mobility participants from the field of school education were also asked to give their feedback on the quality of courses, if they attended one or more of these as part of their mobility project. The results show that they are very satisfied with the courses they attended. They agree to a great extent that courses met their expectations (average grade is 9.44/10), improved their competences (8.78/10) and widened their knowledge about other education systems (9.11/10).

Assuming that skills are the most applicable in real circumstances, these questions were followed by the question about the context of use of skills acquired abroad. All but one of the participants from the field of school education report that they use these skills in their work (regularly or occasionally). Most of them use these skills exclusively during regular classes and some of them equally in regular classes and in extracurricular activities. In addition, most of the participants from VET sector (93%) state that they use skills in their work (regularly or occasionally) and more than a half of them report that they use them equally in regular classes and in extracurricular activities. The distribution of participants is presented in the Table 3.

Table 3. The context of using skills

“In which context do you usually use the skills acquired on mobility?”	KA101 (n = 29)	KA102 (n = 89)
During regular classes	38%	19%
During extracurricular activities	10%	16%
Equally in regular classes and in extracurricular activities	28%	55%
No opportunity for that	0%	7%
Other	24%	3%

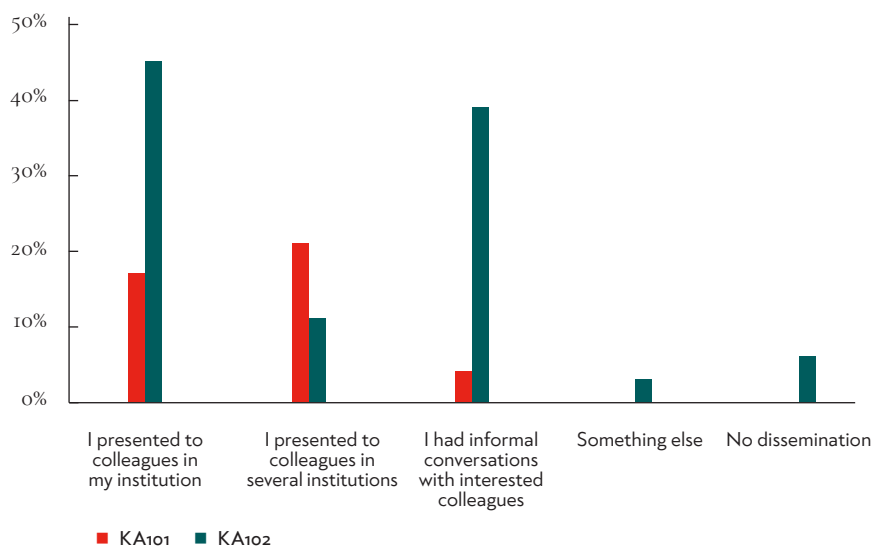
Respondents agreed to a great extent that mobility had important impact in various areas. Mostly, they believe that mobility affected their understanding of other cultures, gaining knowledge about other education systems and new teaching methods, development of new skills and improving the skills they have already possessed. The results are presented in the Table 4 (participants responded on ten-point scale where 10 is the highest grade).

Table 4. Areas of mobility impact (n = 118, average values on a 10-point scale)

“To what extent has the mobility had an impact in the following areas?”	School education	VET
Understanding other cultures	9.43	9.08
Gaining knowledge about other education systems	9.40	8.86
Increased number of contacts with new colleagues abroad	8.29	7.59
Gaining knowledge about new teaching methods	9.29	8.21
Improving foreign languages	8.61	8.44
Improving the skills I have already possessed	9.21	8.69
Development of new skills	9.29	8.69

Participants also gave their feedback on the overall satisfaction with their mobility experience on a ten-point Likert scale, where average grade was 9.78. Most participants (112 out of 118) expressed the desire to repeat the mobility experience, which is also very indicative of their overall satisfaction. They reported that mobility had contributed greatly to their competences, as well as concrete professional skills. Also, they reported that they think that their experience affected the development of their school climate and the whole institution. Also, they provided the positive feedback on the support of the Serbian NA.

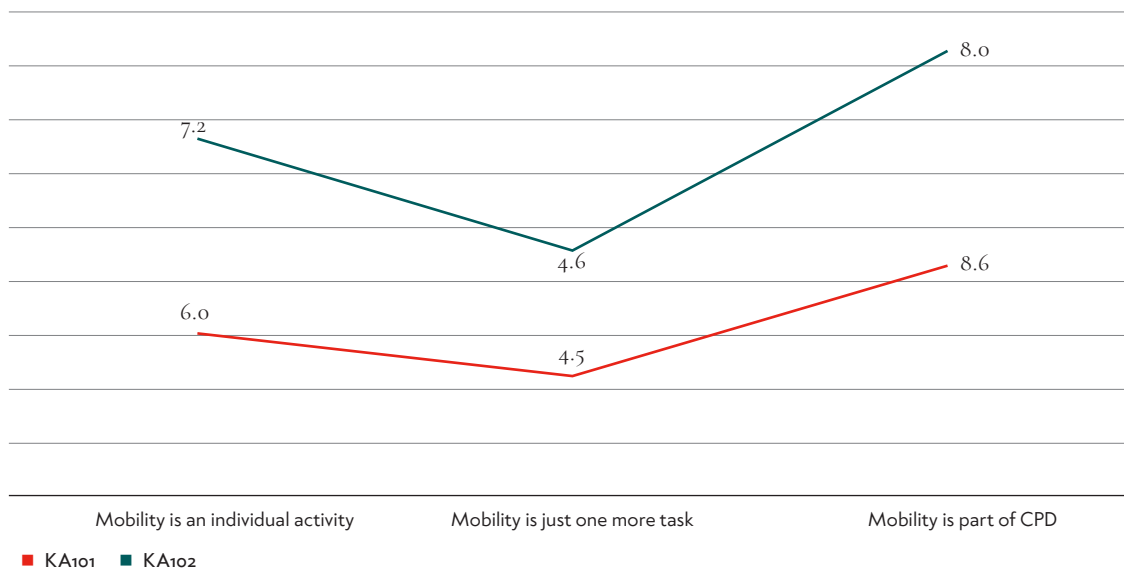
When it comes to the ways in which mobility participants shared what they learned with their colleagues after their return to Serbia, the results show that the most common forms of dissemination are exchanges with colleagues inside and outside the institution, and they mainly refer to holding presentations and exchanging experiences with colleagues. Detailed results are presented on the Figure 3.

Figure 3. Forms of dissemination (n = 118: KA101 = 29, KA102 = 89, % of answers)

Another indicator that was used to assess the mobility impact was to examine the attitudes towards mobility within participants' institutions. On average, respondents stated that their colleagues have

mostly positive attitudes related to mobility projects. They were also asked to evaluate, on a Likert scale, to what extent they agree with three different statements related to their colleagues' attitudes. The lowest level of agreement was with the statement that their colleagues see the mobility as just another task and additional burden, whereas the participants mostly agree that their colleagues see the mobility projects as part of continual professional development (CPD), which is encouraging and indicative of the general positive attitude towards the Erasmus projects. Results are presented on the Figure 4.

Figure 4. Perceived role of mobility (n = 118: KA101 = 29, KA102 = 89, average values on a 10-point scale)



Additionally, respondents were asked to elaborate and explain the attitudes of their colleagues in an open-ended question and most of them stated that these attitudes are positive because their colleagues are showing interest and desire to apply for projects themselves, to hear about their experience and learn from it.

Very positive. We brought with us some extraordinary impressions that were also acknowledged by our colleagues.

[teacher, KA102]

Very positive. Our teachers are delighted with the opportunity we had, they think that's an excellent way for us to learn new skills and improve those that we already have.

[student, KA102]

Very positive. It's a great thing for our school and students to have the opportunity for this type of training.

[teacher, KA102]

They see mobility projects in a very positive way, many colleagues were interested to hear about our mobility experience, to accept and apply new skills and knowledge both independently and in team with other colleagues.

[primary school teacher, KA101]

Neither positive nor negative, opinions are divided, some think it's hardly applicable in our conditions, while others were happy to join the discussion and showed interest in what we learned in mobility.

[primary school teacher, KA101]

Somewhat positive. Most teachers still don't understand that this is not just a travel, but an opportunity to learn something new.

[gymnasium teacher, KA101]

5. Changes in the realization of mobility projects due to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the Erasmus+ programme and participating institutions all over Europe. This section will discuss some of the ways in which the pandemic affected the implementation of mobilities of Serbian participants. The biggest change is related to the total number of implemented mobilities, and to compare these numbers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, data from European Commission's online management and reporting system Mobility Tool+ will be used. It is important to emphasize that data from Mobility Tool relate to calendar years, not school years, so the data for mobilities approved in 2018, 2019 and 2020 calls for projects will be presented.

Having in mind that all mobilities from 2018 call for projects were implemented before the pandemic, the data related to them are presented first, in the Table 4. Most of these mobilities (almost 70%) were implemented in the same calendar year of the call and the rest of them in the following year (2019).

Table 5. Number of mobilities from the 2018. Call and years in which they were implemented

The year of the call for projects/sector	Total number of implemented mobilities	Mobilities implemented in 2018	Mobilities implemented in 2019
School education	165	67%	33%
VET	103	67%	33%

In 2019, Serbia became an official Programme Country for Erasmus+ and the total number of mobilities increased significantly compared to 2018. In 2019, the total number of mobilities was 438 (110 in the school education sector and 328 in the VET sector). A little less than half (43%) of these mobilities were implemented in the same year and only a third of them in 2020. In 2020, a 43 of 136 mobilities were in the school education sector and 93 in VET sector. Around a quarter of these mobilities (26,2%) were postponed to 2021 or 2022 due to COVID-19 pandemic.

The year 2020 was marked by the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, and there has been a significant decline in the total number of mobilities compared to previous year. The total number of mobilities from 2020 call

for projects was 210, which is around 50% less than the total number of mobilities from 2019 call. In addition, all mobilities from 2020 call for projects took place in 2021 or 2022, which means that not a single mobility was implemented in 2020 calendar year. Detailed information related to 2019 and 2020 mobilities is presented in the Table 6.

Table 6. Numbers of mobilities from the 2019 and 2020 call and years in which they were implemented

The year of the call for projects/sector		Total number of implemented mobilities	Mobilities implemented in 2019	Mobilities implemented in 2020	Mobilities implemented 2021	Mobilities implemented in 2022
2019	School education	110	37%	39%	24%	-
	VET	328	45%	28%	26%	1%
2020	School education	53	-	-	91%	9%
	VET	157	-	-	100%	-

The impact survey, the results of which were discussed in previous sections of the article, also included questions about the changes in the way participants' mobility was carried out due to the pandemic. And although most participants stated that there was no change in the way their mobility was carried out in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic – only a small percentage of participants reported the changed forms of organisation of the activities (face-to-face has been replaced with online format), postponement or cancelation of mobilities (mobility project was not implemented) – those answers have to be interpreted carefully. Firstly, individuals whose mobility was postponed, didn't respond to the survey. Secondly, it is possible that the sample consisted mostly of those participants whose mobility was implemented with no change, namely, individuals who went on their mobility before the pandemic outbreak in Europe – from September 2019 to January/February 2020⁷. This interpretation is also supported by data from Foundation Tempus impact analysis for the school year 2020/2021. Namely, 40% of participants in this research stated that their mobility was approved in the 2019 call for projects, but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, 34% of participants are not sure whether their mobility was approved in the 2019 or the 2020 call for projects, which means that the proportion of postponed mobilities might be even higher.

6. Discussion and further steps

This research has confirmed that the expected outcomes of mobility projects that took place during the school year 2019/2020 in school education and VET sector have been achieved to a great extent. Most of the respondents express a remarkably high overall satisfaction with their mobility. They are reporting numerous key competences and specific professional skills developed, high average grades of the course evaluation, and showing rich dissemination of their knowledge.

The research showed that many participants perceive their mobility as having a positive impact on their personal and professional growth. The survey also indicates that around 90% of participants had no previous experience with similar projects, which is encouraging and indicates the increasing interest for mobility

⁷ The state of emergency in Serbia was proclaimed on 15 March 2020.

projects in Serbia. Most participants reported that they attended courses and job shadowing activities, but there is also a considerable number of them who stated that they implemented teaching activities, which is something that should be encouraged as a more active form of participants' engagement.

Project topics were mostly related to inclusive practice, digital competences, innovations in teaching, interdisciplinary competences, which are all the topics recognized as priorities on a national level. The most common forms of dissemination are presentations to colleagues within the participants' institutions. Also, a considerable number of students (KARO2 participants) shared experiences in their schools. They also reported the importance of the competences they developed and overall experience they had.

This survey has certain limitations, such as limited generalizability due to somewhat lower response rate than expected, possibility of socially desirable responses and limited number of questions that allow more in-depth information. In addition, the survey was conducted in the last two months of 2020, which means that for some participants several months have passed between their mobility and completing a survey, and results tend to be much more positive right after the project, which might have reduced the validity of answers. The time factor might also explain the lower-than-expected responsiveness of participants, as they tend to be more motivated to participate in a survey while the experience from mobility is still fresh.

The 2019/2020 school year was partly marked by the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, so there has been a significant decline in the total number of mobilities compared to previous year. Also, from the 2019 call, less than a half of mobilities in the school education and VET sector were carried out during 2019 and around 30% of them during 2020. In the 2020 call, 91% of mobilities in the school education sector and all mobilities in the VET sector were postponed for 2021.

With all this in mind, some improvements of the survey methodology in the subsequent period will be made to make the information on mobilities more valid and reliable. Some aspects of the survey methodology will also be changed according to the changes in the new Erasmus+ programme 2021–2027.



Erasmus+ in Adult Education: impacts of Strategic Partnerships in Germany

By Janina Meyer

1. Background and rationale

In Germany, there have been only few and rather general surveys on the effects of the Erasmus+ programme on adult education¹. Adult education is a complex field in the German education system with very different types of educational institutions and hardly any formal structures². An impact evaluation is accordingly difficult. Therefore, the Erasmus+ National Agency at BIBB (German Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training) aimed at developing a study to qualitatively expand and deepen previous surveys with a focus on the funding area of Strategic Partnerships.

The NA at BIBB commissioned this extensive study of the impacts of Erasmus+ strategic cooperation projects in the adult education sector to an external research partner, EQ Evaluations GmbH. The study was conducted between May 2019 and August 2020 and concentrated on Strategic Partnerships³ between 2014 and 2019.

The principal aim of the research project was to confirm in a systematic and evidence-based way if the targeted impacts of the Erasmus+ adult education programme have been achieved in four areas of activity – within

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¹ See (in German): van Capelle, J. (2017). Befragung zum Impact von Erasmus+-Projekten. *Bildung für Europa*, 27, 2017, pp. 18–21. bit.ly/3ahRNE [access 30.05.2022]; *Nationaler Bericht zur Halbzeitevaluation von Erasmus+ in Deutschland* [Programme Country Reports on the implementation and the impact of Erasmus+: Deutschland], (2017); bit.ly/3GvN52M [access 30.05.2022].

² See Eurydice country report Germany: bit.ly/3GvOlXk [access 28.02.2022]; European Commission (2021). *Adult education and training in Europe: building inclusive pathways to skills and qualifications, Education, Luxembourg: Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency*, bit.ly/3t7W7gZ [access 28.02.2022]; EAEA Germany country reports (2019–2021); countryreport.eaea.org/germany [access 28.02.2022]; *Bildungsbericht Bildung in Deutschland 2020*, p. 207 ff., bit.ly/3wYh100 [access 28.02.2022].

³ Strategic Partnerships (since 2021: Partnerships for cooperation) are transnational projects designed to develop and share innovative practices and promote cooperation, peer learning, and exchanges of experiences in the fields of education, training, and youth. See for more information on Strategic Partnerships / Cooperation Partnerships, bit.ly/38xD07r [access 30.05.2022].

KEYWORDS

**impact assessment,
adult education, KA2,
Strategic Partnerships**

the organisations, in the target groups, in cooperation with partner organisations and in the environment of the organisations.

The targeted impacts of Strategic Partnerships in the adult education sector consist in: producing a positive and sustainable effect on both the persons involved and on the participating organisations; driving the development of new approaches towards dealing with social, ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity; and creating a modern, dynamic, committed and professional environment for the organisations involved.

Thus, the central research question was to analyse to what extent the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership projects in the adult education sector are fulfilling these expectations. Are Erasmus projects really resulting in better knowledge of languages, improved digital competences and a greater degree of understanding of and openness to societal, linguistic and cultural diversity? Is there evidence that a more positive attitude is being displayed towards the European Union and its values? The article sums up the methodological approach of the study and its main findings, arranged by the main focal areas.

2. Methodology / Study design

The implementation of the study was divided into five phases:

- preparation of data collection and analysis;
- systematic review of final reports in terms of secondary data analysis;
- partially standardised online collection of primary data;
- implementation of qualitative case studies;
- evaluation and report submission.

With this procedure, the Generative Causation⁴ approach was followed. This approach, apart from identifying cause-effect relationships, involves a combination of methods to collect information that can explain the occurrence of these relationships. Thus, the qualitative case studies made direct observations in the process possible; furthermore, the document analysis of the final reports made before-and-after observations possible to some extent; and the online survey made retrospective reflection achievable. In addition, the counterfactual framework approach came into play using comparison group data.

Furthermore, the specifications of triangulation were taken into account across the studies. In addition to method triangulation (the use of different data collection methods), this also includes data triangulation (the use of different data sources) and so-called investigator triangulation (the use of several experts).

Within the framework of this funding action, the following documents and contacts were available between 2014 and 2019 and could be consulted in the course of the study:

- 74 final reports of projects coordinated in Germany;
- 429 contact addresses of German coordinating institutions and German partner institutions whose project applications were approved;
- 42 contact addresses of German coordinating institutions whose Erasmus project application (between 2017 and 2019) were not approved.

⁴ Stern, E., et al. (2012). *Broadening the range of designs and methods for impact evaluation. Working Paper 38*. London: Department for International Development, bit.ly/3akQFk8 [access 28.02.2022].

2.1. Preparation of data collections and analysis

Documents such as the European Commission's mid-term evaluation report on the Erasmus+ programme (2017/2018) and a survey on institutional impacts of European projects in Erasmus+ (2017) were examined in the first stage of the study. This analysis was used to develop an analysis grid based on the research questions of the present study. This analysis grid, which was agreed with the National Agency, served as the basis for the work steps to follow.

2.2. Systematic review of final reports in terms of secondary data analysis

In the second phase, 74 final reports that were available in June 2019 were examined deductively along the agreed analysis grid. Each report covered a project period of up to three years. The oldest reports were from the 2014–2017 phase, the more recent from the 2016–2018 phase, and one report from the 2017–2019 phase.

2.3. Partially standardised online collection of primary data

For the third phase of the study, it was examined to which questions and aspects the document analysis could already provide sufficient answers and where there were still gaps remaining. The online survey was designed according to these research gaps. The document analysis was followed by an online survey directed at three different groups:

- institutions that participated in a funded project either as a coordinating institution or as a partner in 2018 or before;
- institutions that in 2019 participated for the first time in a funded project as coordinating institution;
- institutions which unsuccessfully submitted a project application as a coordinating institution in 2017, 2018 or 2019.

The electronic invitation to participate in the online survey was sent by the National Agency. 471 institutions in Germany received the online survey. Response rate achieved 33%, resulting in 154 observations.

2.4. Implementation of qualitative case studies

In the fourth and final phase of data collection, a total of eight qualitative case studies were conducted. The aforementioned analysis grid was checked in terms of which questions the document analysis could already provide sufficient answers to, and to which questions the online survey should provide further answers. This was done to ensure that the remaining gaps in knowledge were covered by the case studies. The case selection was structured on the basis of the results from the document analysis.

2.5. Evaluation and report submission

The final, fifth phase of the study aimed to compile all data in an overall view. The result of this phase is the interim report, which was presented to the National Agency in April 2020. The final report was then drafted according to the agreed structure and submitted on 15 June 2020⁵.

⁵ The complete report is available in German, including the analytical framework and the interview guidelines for the case studies: Quiring, E., et al. (2020), bit.ly/3zcokEz [access 28.02.2022].

3. Main findings

One overarching result of the study is that Erasmus+ can be described as a very successful European funding programme in the adult education sector and that Strategic Partnerships have a positive impact on the institutions. The study presented its results in four areas of impact, in addition to an analysis of the spectrum of funded organisations and significant success factors. Key results were summarised in the following respective sections.

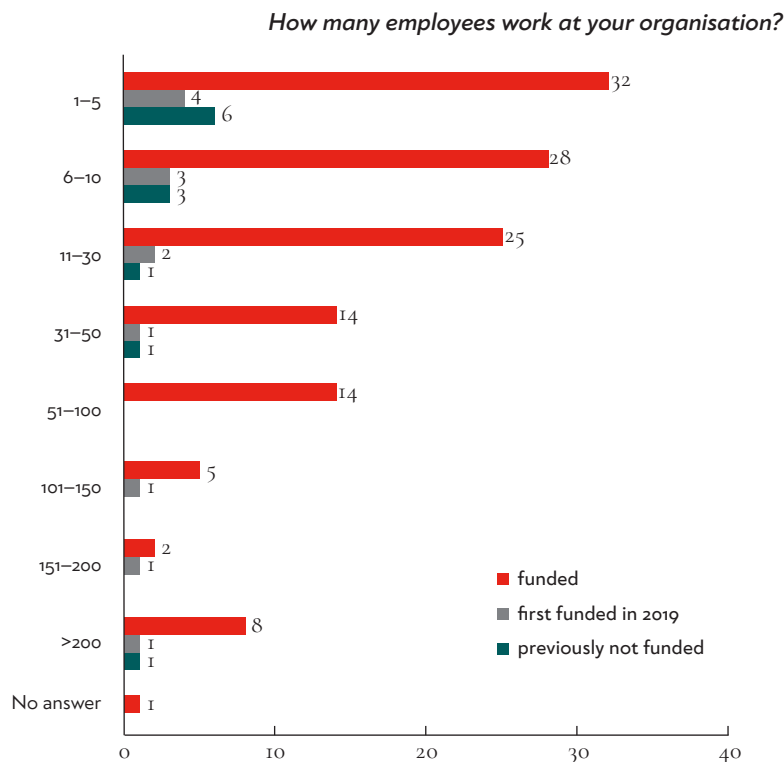
3.1. Spectrum of funded organisations

This section presents the analysis on how many and what types of organisations have received funding via Erasmus+ programmes in the adult education sector since 2014. In addition, distribution of tasks and responsibilities within, as well as focal topics of Erasmus projects were targeted.

Since 2014, 250 Strategic Partnerships coordinated via institutions based in Germany have received Erasmus adult education funding. Since then, the number of projects supported has steadily increased.

Regarding the size of institutions, results show that most institutions submitting an Erasmus project application are small (1 to 10 employees) or medium-sized organizations (11 to 30 employees), (Figure 1). The most frequent organisational structures are societies, foundations and companies, including organisations such as adult education centres, associations and church institutions.

Figure 1. Number of institutions submitting applications by the size of organisation (number of employees, n = 154, information in absolute figures)



Individuals responsible for Erasmus projects within the institutions are mostly senior managers (e.g. Managing Directors, Heads of Division, Project Managers or Project Coordination Managers). Projects are rarely managed by a person directly responsible for EU affairs.

Project implementation is carried out by already employed staff in two thirds of the organisations, while only one third of the organisations employ new staff specifically for the Erasmus project.

The spectrum of topics covered by Strategic Partnerships is very wide. An analysis of 74 final reports showed that many of the funded projects relate to the topic of health and well-being. Other frequent topics include integration, societal participation, European values and democracy.

The majority of institutions indicate in the survey that from their point of view it is very important to deliver high quality products. To ensure this, test phases, review procedures and trials are implemented frequently.

3.2. Impacts within the organisations

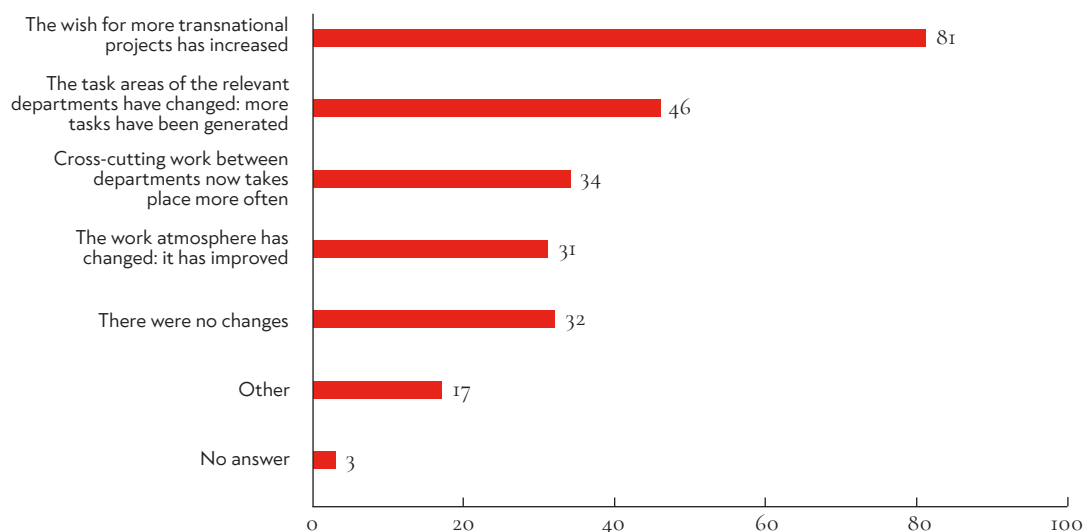
The analyses revealed numerous results indicating positive effects on both the staff and the institutions. Notably, professionalisation effects amongst the staff in charge of managing Erasmus projects were observed. These impacts essentially relate to acquisition of didactic competences, personal, content-related and professional development during the project, expansion of foreign language skills and further increases in personal competences.

At the institutional level, permanent structural changes rarely occur. Neither the case studies nor the final reports state that new jobs have been created or that work units have undergone restructuring in the wake of the project. The duration of any structural changes taking place is generally confined to the project implementation period. Nevertheless, less extensive structural changes, such as changes in the scope of tasks within the relevant department, were observed by 46 (36%) of the respondents to the online survey. 34 respondents (26%) also reported an increase in cross-cutting work between departments, whilst 31 respondents (24%) noted an improvement in the work atmosphere (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Permanent changes brought about by the Erasmus project

(n = 129, information in absolute figures, multiple responses were possible, group of "funded" institutions)

What permanent changes has your organisation seen shortly before the end or after the end of the project?



In addition, the study showed that Erasmus projects often instigated a significant digital boost that has led to the permanent introduction of digital information and communication tools even after the project has ended. Transnational networking on the benefits and drawbacks of specific tools has resulted in generating a certain innovative impetus and broadening the organisations' perspective beyond familiar, tried-and-tested instruments.

Regarding outputs, the study shows that the tangible and intangible project results and products are significantly improved by transnational cooperation. They benefit to a very high degree from transnational networking: the online survey showed that in 80% of the cases intellectual outputs are included in the portfolio of the institutions and contribute to the modernisation of the offer.

3.3. Impacts on the target groups

Strategic Partnerships in the adult education sector address a broad spectrum of topics and target groups. The analysis showed that Erasmus adult education projects are particularly successful in reaching vulnerable groups that are often out of reach for formal education structures. The “vulnerable group” includes refugees and migrants, low-skilled persons, persons with multiple difficulties in placement on the job market, Sinti and Roma, persons with physical or mental disabilities, low-income households, (long-term) unemployed persons, elderly dependent people and single-parent families.

Numerous comments by project managers emphasised the crucial importance of analysing the socio-demographic and socio-structural characteristics of the target group(s) at an early stage. This way, project provision can be designed adequately and precisely for the target group. Socio-structural characteristics include educational status, employment and occupation, income and place of residence. The final reports show that project leaders mainly addressed educational status. The analysis reveals that 29% of the projects are aimed at low-skilled persons (persons with a low level of school education and persons whose educational certificates and qualifications are not recognised in Germany). In contrast, 32% of the projects were directed at persons with a higher level of educational qualification (Figure 3).

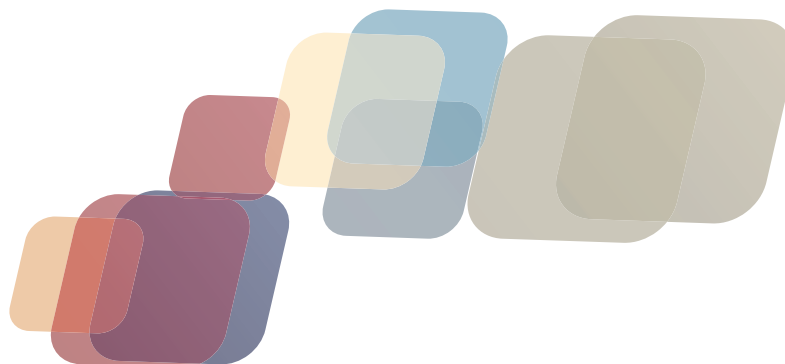
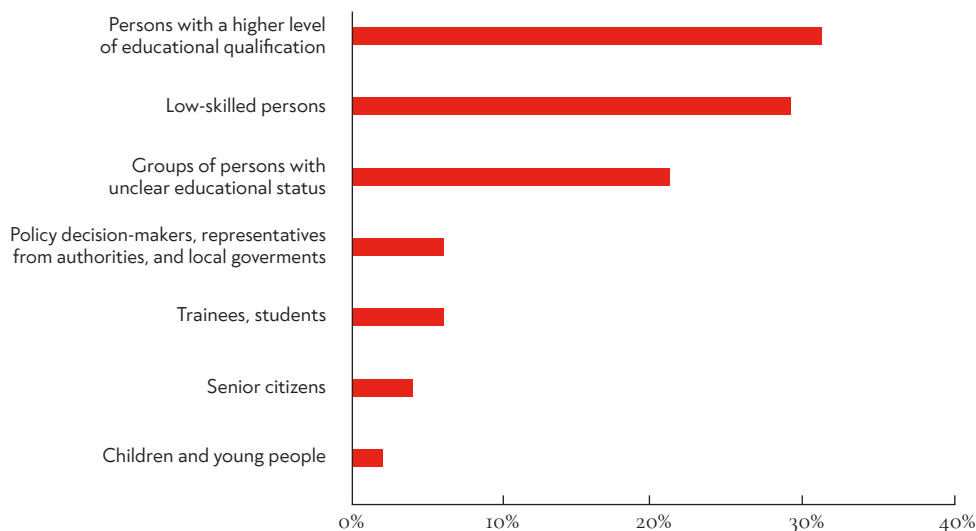


Figure 3. Target groups sorted by the socio-structural characteristic of educational status
(n = 74, multiple responses were possible, group of “funded” institutions)



Source: Final reports.

Country-specific variance of target groups is reported as a significant challenge in transnational projects: e.g. the target group “refugees” may certainly differ within Europe. Thus, internal differentiation in the project execution is necessary.

Whereas the other partners expect a large number of refugees from crisis regions in the Middle East such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, most refugees in Spain clearly come from Venezuela and are seeking to come here for economic reasons. [Against this background, provision needed to be adjusted accordingly to meet the specific requirements].

[Source: KA204-003268, Final report, p. 11]

3.4. Impacts on Cooperation with Partner Organisations

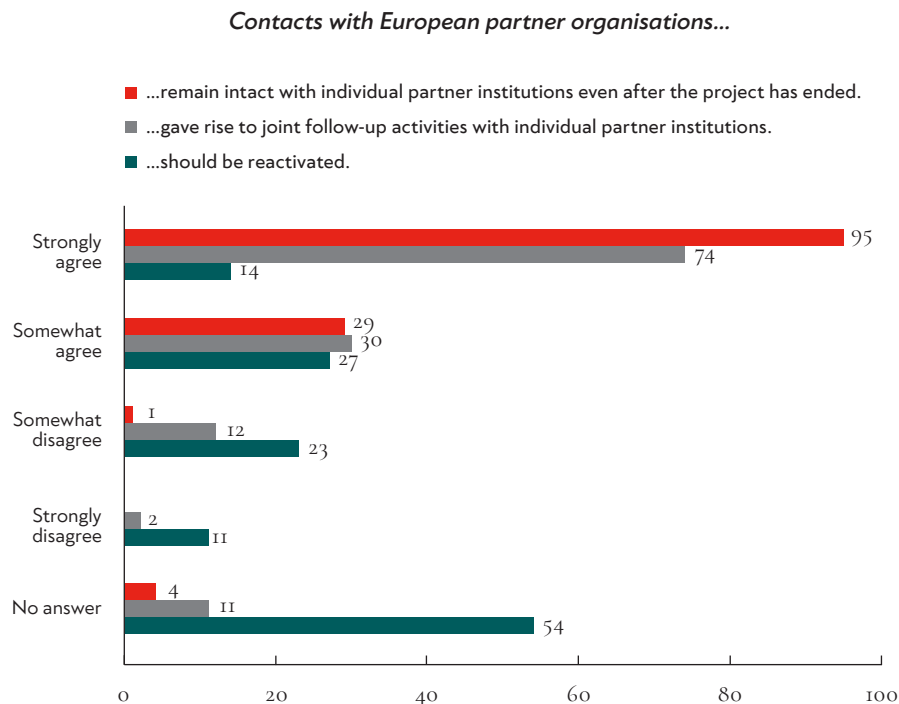
The number of partners cooperating within a Strategic Partnership under Erasmus+ varies between three to eleven institutions. Cooperation partners usually include at least one or two institutions with experience in the implementation of international projects using public funds that have already established relevant management expertise.

The partner composition in European projects is often very heterogeneous, which leads to a multi-perspective view on the project topics. This approach is perceived as a major benefit, as it leads to high-quality and innovative products. Transnational cooperation also generates positive effects on a sense of European citizenship, raising awareness of common values and diversity, and on the formation and strengthening of networks.

Virtually all cooperation partners state that quality assurance of the organisational process forms an integral part of cooperation. Quality assurance should be applied to all aspects of the project organisation, including financial management, internal and external responsibilities, and evaluation.

After project completion, contacts between the participating partner organisations remain very stable. In 124 (96%) cases, links with the European partner institutions remain intact even after the project has ended. In 104 (81%) cases, joint follow-up activities were organised (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Development of contacts with partner institutions
(n = 129, information in absolute figures, group of "funded" institutions)



Across all three survey forms (documentation analysis, online questionnaire, case studies), reports on collaboration with partner organisations are extremely positive. The climate of cooperation is perceived as inspiring, horizon-broadening and enriching.

Within the framework of the online survey, there was almost unanimous agreement that transnational cooperation:

- consolidates a sense of European togetherness;
- strengthens an institution's own international networks;
- facilitates an exchange of views on joint and differing values;
- and leads to a greater awareness of how to deal with diversity.

Cooperation with partner institutions also plays an important role for institutions that have not previously received funding. They have to coordinate with such partner institutions also in the course of the application process. For this reason, the online survey specifically asked what had become of these contacts in the event of the application being rejected. The analysis revealed that the majority of respondents felt that the contacts should be reactivated because they were highly beneficial. These respondents also indicated that contacts

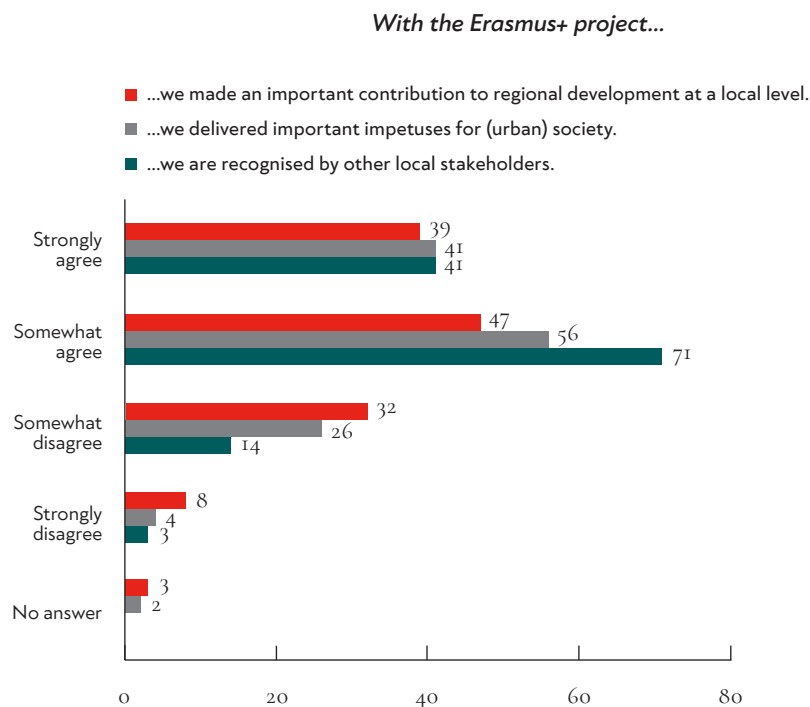
continue to exist with some of the partner institutions and that joint follow-up activities have been or are being pursued with individual partner institutions.

3.5. Impacts within the environment of organisations

The study measured impacts within the environment of the funded organisations regarding changes in the (local) perception of organisations and their reputation as potential cooperation partners, as well as networking effects resulting from project cooperation.

European projects have a positive effect on the image of the organisations involved and often lead to a better perception by third parties. Many institutions reported in the online survey that the projects serve as door openers, especially to local actors, and thus promote networking. From the point of view of the funded institutions, projects are recognised mainly by local stakeholders, as they are able to deliver important impetuses for (urban) society and can make a significant contribution to regional development (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Effects of the Erasmus projects at a local level
(n = 129, information in absolute figures, group of "funded" institutions)



Erasmus projects also lead to the funded institutions being taken more seriously as potential partner organisations in their environment. A positive response from professional circles is also often expressed through invitations to lectures or professional conferences.

The extent to which a project reaches political actors depends strongly on the respective topic and approach. In some projects, this is achieved through the early and targeted involvement of policy-makers. In one project, for example, political patronage helped to gain good access to health authorities. The targeted

approach of responsible ministries and downstream agencies generated resonance in all countries involved, resulting in further changes being initiated consequently within national aid systems. However, it is important to recognise that not all Erasmus projects have a political dimension, thus policy-makers are not always in the centre of attention.

The data permits the conclusion that Erasmus projects to some extent improve the image of the organisations conducting them. Some Erasmus projects have received prizes and awards at a regional or national level. The tangible and intangible products often create a USP for the organisations. The respondents of the survey frequently express that the development of products that result from transnational networking improves the level of quality of those products. The USP emerges from that quality improvement, which is also expressed by feedback from stakeholders and experts: a general perception shared by stakeholders is that the topics and problems dealt with in these partnership projects are viewed from multiple perspectives, and that ideas and suggestions that were previously unknown in their own specialist circles emerge.

3.6. Significant success factors

As the results of the study show, Erasmus+ in the adult education sector can be described as a highly successful European funding programme. A majority of the analysed projects have achieved their goals. However, it remains to be described exactly which contexts and factors made all these projects so successful. The final analytical chapter examines the factors that are significant in terms of cooperation with partner organisations regarding the development of products or results, and the factors that are crucial for successful dissemination of the products/results.

Concerning general conditions at the institutional level, institutions can mostly rely on staff who already have extensive experience in implementing EU-funded projects. Many of them have been working in the same institution for many years and usually do not need additional training to be able to implement an Erasmus project. Therefore, the additional integration of inexperienced project participants does not have a negative impact, as they receive guidance from their more experienced colleagues and adapt to the processes. Teamwork is thus an important aspect in the collaboration setting.

If people involved in a cooperation project remain connected with the institution even after the project has ended, it helps organisations to make permanent use of the acquired expertise. This often leads to follow-up processes, as the staff members who have already worked in depth with the respective topics and partner relationships are familiar with the processes (Figure 6).

The key factors enhancing a successful cooperation with European project partners indicate the benefits of a heterogeneous composition of institutions that lead to a multi-perspective approach to the project topics and help to broaden the point of view of each project partner. In addition, the importance of a good cooperation climate and encounters between partners have been emphasised as significant success factors (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Success factors: general conditions

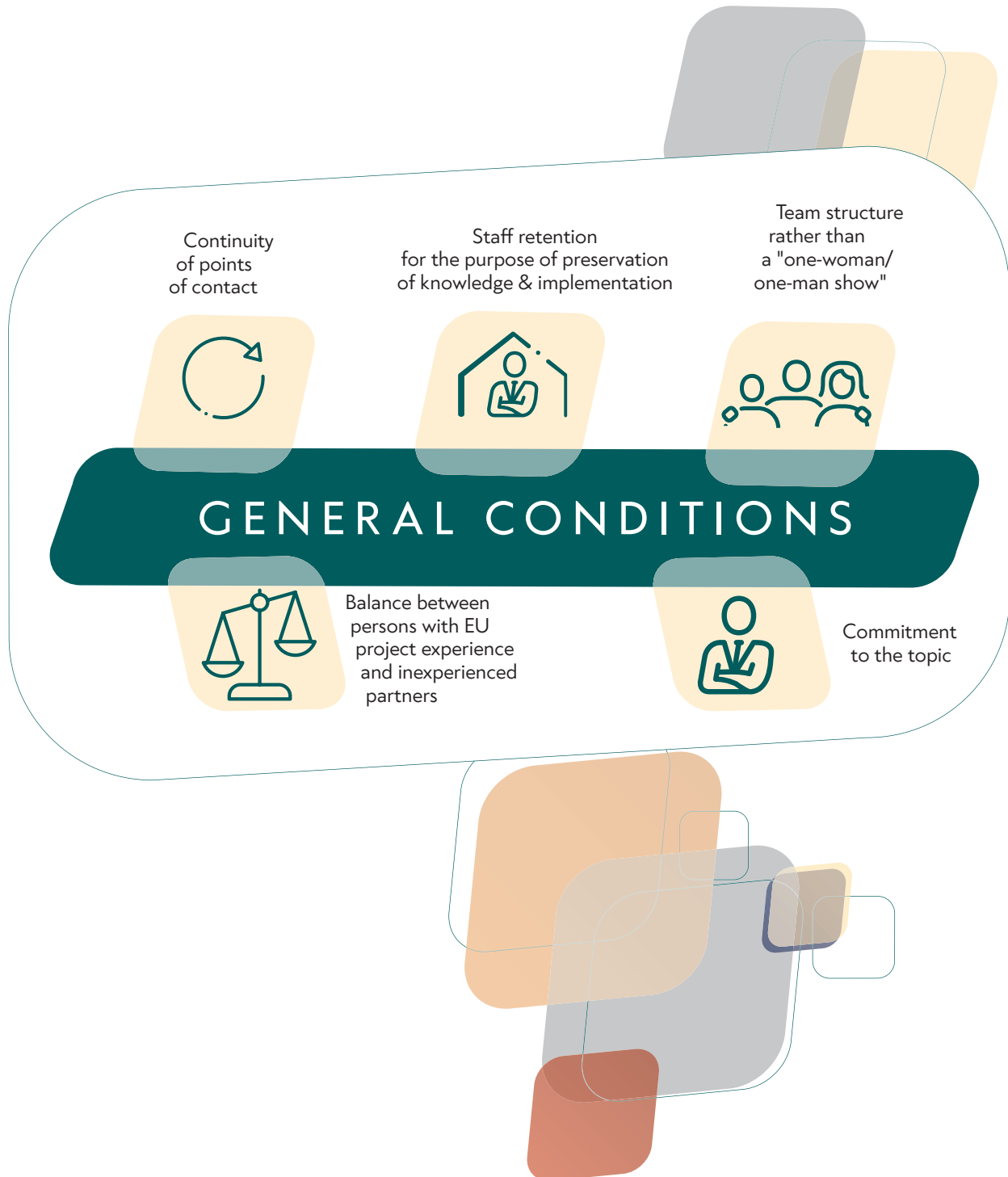
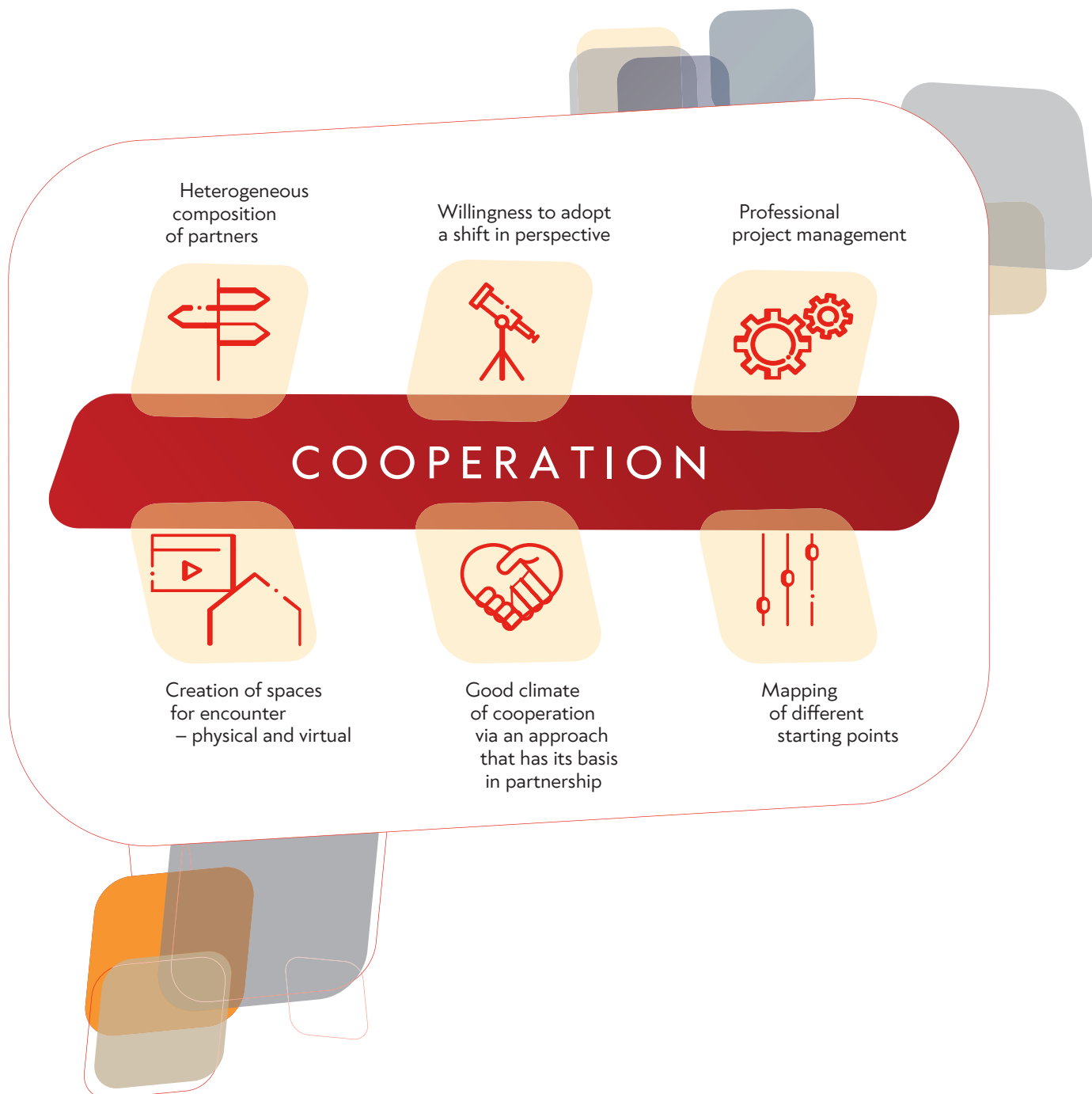


Figure 7: Success factors: cooperation



4. Conclusions and recommendations

For the NA at BIBB, a crucial outcome of the study is that the positive effects of Strategic Partnerships in the adult education sector are now evidence-based. In addition, the study confirms that adult education in particular, covering its diverse topics and flexible approaches in the non-formal sector, represents an important component of lifelong learning.

With these results, the NA at BIBB can now make a better-informed case for the further development of the programme to policy-makers at national and European level. The key factors for successful project implementation in terms of framework conditions, cooperation, quality and impact, which were identified as by-products of the study, provide suggestions for the development of even more targeted project support. Finally, the positive results are a convincing argument for all institutions to apply, because the study proves that a European project is definitely worthwhile.

In the aftermath of the study, the successor Erasmus+ programme for 2021-2027 now offers the opportunity to establish a novel and continuous impact measurement. After initial considerations in the National Agency at BIBB as to how, building on the study, the project results could be systematically recorded, an initiative for transnational impact assessment emerged. Located in the field of TCA (Training and Cooperation Activities), a Long-Term Activity for research-based impact assessment in the adult education sector of the Erasmus+ programme (RIA-AE) is being organised with a group of NAs coordinated by the NA at BIBB for 2022. We are confident that in the coming years the significance of European projects in the adult education sector for the educational landscape will become even clearer through these joint transnational research activities.

In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes even more important for Erasmus projects to create strong and resilient partnerships that include the use of modern communication technologies and remote collaboration techniques. The study was conducted just before the pandemic began, but two main aspects of the findings seem particularly relevant. Firstly, most Strategic Partnership projects are producing a significant boost in digitalisation at the institutions. This was probably a helpful lesson for keeping up virtual cooperation during the pandemic, as project participants were already familiar with this format of collaboration. Secondly, it was found that project cooperation fosters the expansion of existing networks and that the majority of Strategic Partnerships maintains contact with their European partners. Such an already strong and established network of project cooperation should be a good basis to maintain contacts during and after the pandemic in a sustainable way. Since the future is always uncertain and global crises might repeatedly force us to rely on remote means of cooperation, we should definitely all add these competences to our toolbox.



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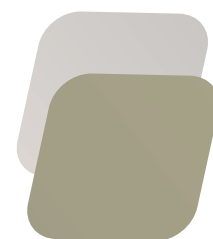
- The English summary of the study: bit.ly/3t2vCt1 [access 28.02.2022];
- The complete report is available in German, including the analytical framework and the interview guidelines for the case studies: bit.ly/3zcokE2 [access 28.02.2022].

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Erasmus project sustainability during the COVID-19 pandemic

By Jadwiga Fila

1. Introduction

The Erasmus programme has been present in the field of international education for more than 30 years. Despite some minor changes, it is still the European Commission's main tool for supporting education, training, youth and sport through certain themes, namely:

- stimulating the development of skills across all sectors;
- improving the infrastructure for the transfer of knowledge;
- encouraging building partnerships and undertaking cooperation with business;
- involving in developing integrated local and regional development plans¹.

The Erasmus+ programme constantly proves its effectiveness in this respect and contributes to the broader EU socioeconomical and educational policies. However, since the beginning of 2020 in Europe, in the difficult and unpredictable times of the COVID-19 pandemic, all those activities have become very demanding to be fulfilled. One of the main threats refers to maintaining sustainability of funded projects. Taking into account that the majority of activities realised in the frames of the Erasmus+ programme are based on international mobility of the final beneficiaries, which in many cases was reduced or totally suspended, the completion of educational projects became difficult. The main obstacles discouraging international learning mobility within the projects were: closed borders and restrictions for travelling, immediate lockdowns in many countries, closures of schools and universities, introduction of online and blended learning without adequate preparation and strict sanitary restrictions.

The successful continuation of project activities, despite the external conditions, was mostly the merit of highly involved project leaders with specific set of strong key competences. Successfully leading an education

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KEYWORDS

digital competence, international education, project leaders, project sustainability, competences 4.0

¹ European Commission (2011). *Supporting Growth and Jobs — An Agenda for the Modernisation of Europe's Higher Education Systems. Communication from The Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and The Committee of the Regions*. Brussels: European Commission. bit.ly/3PU4Hte [access 21.06.2021].

project, especially during the unstable times of global pandemic, requires a certain combination of skills and competences. Based on the survey addressed to Erasmus project coordinators, we would like to argue that those key competences are in fact very similar to the competences 4.0 which are closely related to the notion of the Industry 4.0².

2. Industry 4.0 and competences 4.0

The Industry 4.0 phenomenon derived from the German Strategy for Development of Industry which was “a national strategic initiative from the German government [...]. It aims to drive digital manufacturing forward by increasing digitisation and the interconnection of products, value chains and business models. It also aims to support research, the networking of industry partners and standardisation”³.

The Industry 4.0 is characterised in principle by the global connectivity, comprehensive use of big data and artificial intelligence in different areas, more and more widespread internet of things and cloud computing. This new reality results in emergence of new jobs that haven't existed until recently. Following the *Future of Jobs Report 2020* from World Economic Forum 2020⁴ there is an increasing demand especially for:

- data analysts and scientists;
- artificial intelligence and machine learning specialists;
- big data specialists;
- project managers.

This big shift on the labour market, resulting in creation of totally new jobs, requires at the same time some new set of competences, namely competences 4.0. According to “Top 10 skills” ranking from *Future of Jobs Report 2020*, in 2020 the most wanted skills in the labour market were:

- complex problem solving;
- critical thinking;
- creativity;
- people management.

Those key competences are also among the first 5 top skills which are expected to be most wanted until 2025 on the labour market, according to the *Future of Jobs Report 2020*. The above 4.0 competences are not only crucial in the labour market. If we look at managing international education project as a similar task to managing an institution we may come to the conclusion that the leaders' key competences are in fact identical. In this context we decided to take a closer look into the Erasmus project leaders' skills and check if their competences are in line with competences 4.0 and what influence they may have on projects sustainability during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

² More on this topic and this research study may be found in: Poszytek, P. (2021). *The competences 4.0 in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic as facilitators in the realisation, management and sustainability of Erasmus+ projects*. Warsaw: Poltex.

³ Klitou, D., Conrads, J., Rasmussen, M. (2017). *Germany: Industrie 4.0*. Brussels: European Commission. Downloaded from bit.ly/3QeLZwK [access 9.06.2022].

⁴ bit.ly/3wXkPBM [access 21.06.2021].

3. Research design and methodology

The Polish Erasmus+ National Agency decided to look into this issue from the empirical perspective. Therefore the research was conducted covering almost 3 000 project leaders from Poland within the Erasmus+ programme coming from all education sectors. Over 1 000 of responses were received from project leaders and 990 of them fulfilled the final research criteria, which were: being a project coordinator from March 2020 to November 2020 (1st phase of COVID-19 pandemic in Poland). In 82% of studied projects the key activities in those initiatives took place within this set time frame.

A total of 80% of the project leaders came from the public sector. NGOs and the private sector were represented by 13% and 7% of the respondents respectively, which actually quite well reflected the distribution structure of the Erasmus participant profiles. However, it needs to be underlined that the project sample was not of representative character and therefore the conclusions should not be generalised for the whole population of Erasmus project leaders.

Respondents were coming from all Erasmus+ programme actions and all five education sectors - mostly represented was school education (422 respondents) and vocational education (233 respondents), followed by higher education (141 respondents), youth (128 respondents) and adult education (98 respondents)⁵.

Data were collected through a quantitative study with an online questionnaire (CAWI method) of 70 inquiries. Finally, 990 valid forms were obtained for the analysis, which included among others correlation measures, factor analysis, analysis of Likert scales and logarithmic regression.

Taking all the above-mentioned aspects into consideration, the key research questions were the following:

- Which competences are especially useful in the management of Erasmus projects in the times of COVID-19 pandemic?
- Which factors and leaders' characteristics might most facilitate the sustainability of Erasmus projects in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The working hypothesis of this research was that regardless of the unstable conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the relational and networking characteristics of Erasmus projects facilitate the sustainability of these projects to a substantial extent. The idea was to check which factors may increase and reduce the chances for suspension of the educational projects.

4. Research results

4.1. Projects in the study – sample description

In most cases projects were implemented within a group of 1–3 international partners. 16% of the respondents confirmed that their project included over 5 partner institutions from abroad. 26% of the project leaders co-ordinated 2 or 3 projects simultaneously, whereas 67% coordinated only one project. 52% of the respondents managed the project independently and the rest shared their coordinating responsibilities.

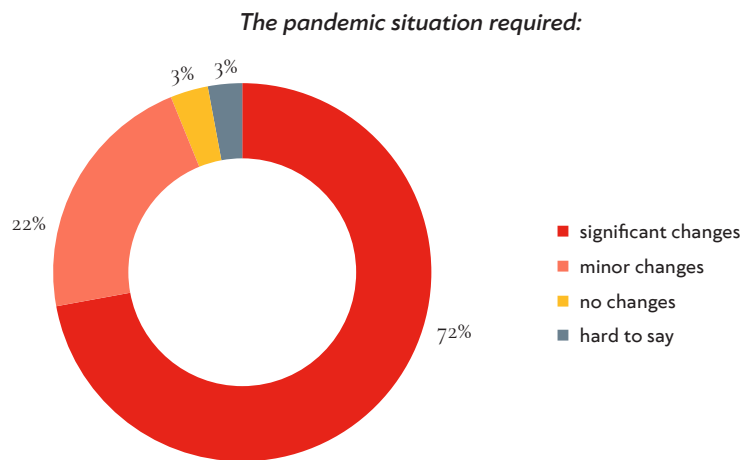
Generally, the COVID-19 pandemic had a major influence on carrying out Erasmus projects, especially those with the mobility component. The main challenge for project leaders was to ensure the project

⁵ The number of respondents in the study was 990 persons, but one project leader could implement more than one project at the same time. That is why the sum of given numbers exceeds 990.

sustainability. As a result of mostly external factors and conditions in our sample 29% of 990 project leaders admitted that during the pandemic, their projects were suspended and prolonged. Yet 59% of projects were under implementation and 12% were successfully completed.

Moreover, 72% of project leaders stated that the pandemic situation required introducing significant changes in their projects and another 22% had to implement some minor changes. No changes were required only in the case of 3% of studied projects.

Figure 1. Types of changes which were required in the projects due to the pandemic situation (n = 990)



Source: Poszytek (2021).

Only 22% of project leaders who took part in the study managed to carry out successfully more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of project activities initially planned. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic almost 40% of them didn't manage to carry out successfully more than $\frac{1}{4}$ of foreseen activities.

4.2. Leaders' competence profile

In order to approach the research questions the first step was to distinguish a set of characteristics which may build key competences that are useful in leading international projects. Following the data, four key competences were found which in practice were very coherent with the competences 4.0 described above. Those were:

- digital competences;
- managerial competences;
- cognitive competences;
- social competences.

The following step was to recode all possible indicators and variables from the questionnaire to create new variables reflecting these four major competences. The items included in this part of analysis were mostly statements self-assessed on 5-point Likert scale, where score 1 meant the lowest intensity of the feature and

score 5 meant its highest intensity⁶. The questionnaire items and inquiries were mostly based on agreement/disagreement with a given statement or on evaluation of how easy or difficult a given task or situation was.

Afterwards, having assessed the reliability of the scales used in the research tool, it was finally possible to confirm the four major competences along with their specific dimensions. Table 1 includes the calculated average values for each dimension of each competence for all respondents in the survey (n = 990). The scale ranges from 1 to 5, where 5 means the highest level of a given competence. It is worth noticing, however, that the assessment presented in the table is based on self-evaluation of the respondents and therefore is of a declarative character. Consequently, it cannot be treated as a reflection of the objective features of assessed persons.

Table 1. Coordinators' competence profile (n = 990)

Competences	Dimensions	Average level of competence (scale 1–5)
Digital and technical	use of computer in everyday work	4.37
	work with online documents	4.18
Managerial	cooperation with people	3.77
	team coordination	3.86
Cognitive and thinking	proactiveness, innovation, openness to challenges	3.96
Social and psychosocial	relations and emotions	3.94
	adaptability and managing stress during the pandemic	1.74
	maintaining contacts, cooperation	3.96
	communication	3.63

Source: Poszytek (2021).

The highest score was obtained for digital and technical competence, for both its dimensions – everyday use of computer and working with online documents – 4.37 and 4.18 respectively. This shows that project leaders assess themselves as persons of high digital literacy which undoubtedly helps them to run international education projects in the times of limited physical mobility. The cognitive competence was assessed slightly below the level of 4 (3.96) which was analysed one-dimensionally and was understood as proactiveness, innovation and openness to challenges. Such a high score for this competence proves the readiness of questioned project leaders showing the “can-do attitude” to cope with new tasks and activities. The result for the managerial competence is slightly lower, but still assessed as relatively high: 3.86 for team coordination and 3.77 for cooperation with other people. The most varied results were obtained for social and psychosocial competences. The most distinctive feature was the lowest score for one dimension: adaptability and managing stress during the pandemic (1.74). This dimension referred to how the respondents coped with the uncertainty caused by the pandemic, both in professional and health terms. This low score means that Erasmus project leaders assessed the pandemic situation, not surprisingly, as very difficult and stressful. However, at the same time, the other dimensions of social competence stayed at relatively high level: coping with relations and emotions (3.94), maintaining contacts and cooperating within a team (3.96) and ability to communicate (3.63). The partial scores of the social competence clearly

⁶ Some of the statements needed to be recoded in order to follow this rule.

showed that the uncertain situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the stress it has generated, was judged by the project leaders as a serious threat.

4.3. Leaders' competences vs. project sustainability and efficiency

The notion of project sustainability can be observed from different perspectives. The one followed in the study had a binary character and was based on the continuation of the project activities, namely:

- the project was still implemented or successfully completed;
- the project had to be suspended and prolonged due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is evident that the suspension of the project may be a result of many different causes and leaders' competences are just one of many possible factors that might have influence on this decision. However, we wanted to check whether there is a significant difference in scores within given competence for those leaders who suspended their projects and those who had them successfully completed. The Table 2 shows the scores:

Table 2. Leaders' competences and project sustainability

	Average score for suspended or prolonged projects (n = 283, scale 1–5)	Average score for successfully finished projects (n = 124, scale 1–5)
Digital competence: the use of computer in everyday work	4.32	4.34
Digital competence: work with online documents	4.15	4.26
Social competence: relations and emotions	3.91	4.00
Social competence: maintaining contacts and cooperation	3.89	4.02
Cognitive competence: proactiveness, innovation, openness to challenges	3.88	4.06
Managerial competence: team coordination	3.79	3.95
Managerial competence: cooperation with people	3.76	3.89
Social competence: communication	3.60	3.65
Social competence: adaptability and managing stress during the pandemic	1.58	1.82

Source: Poszytek (2021).

In the case of all competences, the score obtained was slightly higher for the project leaders who completed their projects successfully than for the project leaders who suspended or prolonged their projects. Although the discrimination was weak, potentially relationship can be drawn between the sustainability of projects and the level of competences 4.0 of the coordinators.

The second captivating issue was the notion of project efficacy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some interesting results might be driven regarding the number of project activities which were delivered in the projects vs. leaders' competences. According to the study, there exists a statistically significant difference between project leaders who implemented their project in less than 25% and those who implemented their project in more than 75% in reference to their respective levels of managerial competence in the dimension of team coordination (Table 3).

Table 3. Leaders' managerial competence and project efficacy

Question from the questionnaire	Level of project realisation	Number of respondents (n)	Level of managerial competence in the dimension of team coordination
In your opinion, to what extent the project activities conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic were implemented successfully?	max 25%	387	3.78
	more than 75%	222	4.03

Source: Poszytek (2021).

Project leaders who associated the successful implementation of their projects during the COVID-19 pandemic with their own skills and competences, also declared to have higher level of managerial competences than the average for all project leaders.

4.4. Social competence: adaptability and managing stress

The adaptability and managing stress competence reached quite outstanding scores in the study. As all other competences were declared on a very homogeneous level (between 3.60 to 4.30) this one attained the surprisingly low average level of 1.74.

The data show that project leaders with higher adaptation abilities declared at the same time slightly higher average level of cognitive, managerial and digital competence. This means that these project leaders were likely to fear the unknown less and adapt to new situations better.

The relation between ability to manage stress and age was also observed. Stress and the feeling of uncertainty negatively influenced the proactive attitude, especially in the group of older coordinators, who treated stress as a threat, whereas younger Erasmus project leaders tended to treat it more as a challenge. This phenomenon seems to be quite important in the context of the study, since risk and uncertainty are always inherent features of managerial activities (Table 4).

Table 4. Relationship between managing stress and project sustainability by factor of age

Age of project leader	No. of respondents (n)	The average level of social competence – adaptability and managing stress (scale 1-5)	Project status		
			During implementation (n)	Suspended (n)	Finished (n)
Up to 46	568	1.78	347 (61%)	154 (27%)	67 (12%)
Over 46	422	1.69	236 (56%)	129 (31%)	57 (13%)

Source: Poszytek (2021).

It was observed that younger leaders (up to age 46), with slightly higher level of social competence in the dimension of adaptability and managing stress tended to complete their projects successfully slightly

more frequently than the older leaders (aged 46 years and over). The age factor is naturally related to project leader's working experience. We tackled the data from this perspective and confirmed that project leaders with relatively less experience (up to 15 years) feared the pandemic situation slightly less and equally suspended their activities less frequently.

4.5. Other important factors boosting project sustainability

In further analysis a list of other moderators was examined to check the strength and direction of relationship between the competences 4.0 of Erasmus project leaders and the sustainability of their projects. Although, in general the relationships were not very strong, the Table 5 describes the most evident ones derived from the data:

Table 5. Factors influencing project sustainability (n = 990)

Moderator	Description of the relationship
Type of institution	NGO sector scored higher in both dimensions of managerial competence in comparison to other sectors. Leaders from NGOs have slightly higher competence in managing stress, however, it is private sector that has significantly fewer suspended or prolonged projects (18% of suspended or prolonged projects in this category in comparison to average 29%).
Number of project partners	The more partners in a project, the higher social competence in reference to maintaining contacts and cooperation. The category of 5 or more partners in the projects suffered significantly fewer suspensions or prolongations (19% of suspended or prolonged projects in this category in comparison to average 29%).
Project budget	Leaders of projects with highest budgets (EUR 200,000 or more) have significantly higher competence of managing stress with the score of 2.01 in comparison to average 1.74, in this group the ratio of suspended or prolonged projects is only 8% in comparison to average 29%.
Sector of education	No relationships between educational sector and competences levels were observed but in higher education and adult education significantly lower ratios of suspended or prolonged projects were reported: 10% and 20% respectively in comparison to average 29% whereas vocational education and training sector suffered mostly with ratio of 37% of suspended or prolonged projects in comparison to average 29%; however, it was mostly due to objective hindrances to perform vocational trainings and activities that require face-to-face interactions.

Source: Poszytek (2021).

4.6. Predictions of project sustainability

In order to predict the project sustainability, understood as ability to successfully continue and complete the project, versus project suspension or prolongation, the logistic regression was introduced in order to predict the dependent variable. The independent variables in the model were as follows⁷:

- average level of leaders' 4.0 competences;
- project leader personal engagement into the project;

⁷ For more detailed data regarding the analysis please see the Annex at the end of the article.

- project leader experience (ex. work experience, number of institutions involved in the project, number of projects carried out);
- project features (ex. project budget and number of international participants).

The proposed model predicts the chances of project suspension in relation to the above-listed independent variables. Data from the model can be interpreted in a way which shows by how many percent the chances of project suspension decrease or increase if the value of a given parameter increases by one.

Table 6. The chances of project suspension in relation to significant predictors (n = 990)

Predictors	Exp(β)	Decrease of a chance to suspend project	Increase of a chance to suspend project
Cognitive competence: proactiveness, innovation, openness to challenges	0.628	37%	-
Social competence: adaptability and managing stress during the pandemic	0.583	42%	-
Only person managing the project	1.516	-	52%
Professional time spent on project management:			
Professional time spent on project management: 20–75%	0.645	35%	-
Professional time spent on project management: more than 75%	0.379	62%	-
Project budget: more than EUR 200,000	0.238	76%	-
Length of service at the institution where the surveyed project was implemented: 10 years and more	1.567	-	57%

Source: Poszytek (2021).

According to the data in Table 6 the most influential factors that determine the sustainability of the projects during the COVID-19 pandemic were the level of project budget and the time spent on project management by the project leader. The chances of project suspension decreased by 76% in relation to projects with large budgets of more than 200,000 EUR and if a project leader spent more than 75% of his/her professional time on the project management the chances of project suspension decreased by 62% in comparison to leaders who spent on management less time.

What is more, a relationship between chosen 4.0 competences and the project sustainability can also be observed in the model. Social competence in its dimension of adaptability and managing stress and cognitive competence in its dimension of proactiveness, innovation and openness to challenges can decrease the chances of project suspension by 42% and 37% respectively, if the score of each competence rises by one point (on 1–5 scale).

5. Conclusions

Conducted study shows that there might exist some specific leaders' personal traits and competences which could influence positively the sustainability of Erasmus projects. Namely, those are: social competence with its dimension of adaptability and managing stress, cognitive competence with its dimension of proactiveness and openness to challenges and managerial competence with its dimension of team coordination. In addition, the first two competences also showed relatively high relevance in predicting the chances for successful implementation of the project according to our analysis and created statistical models.

To sum up, we managed to show that the competences 4.0 constitute a very universal construct which may be used in varied contexts, also while analysing the leadership in the environment of the educational international projects. One can claim that the high level of those competences forms a kind of protective shield against the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to a certain degree. It was proved that especially highly-developed competences from the area of managerial and social skills may facilitate the implementation, management and sustainability of Erasmus projects.

6. Annex – Logistic regression

The aim was to look at the obtained data from the prognostic point of view and to observe which of the above-described factors can potentially be most influential in sustaining Erasmus+ projects. The underlying question was to what extent the ratio of projects suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic can be lower if the score on Erasmus project leaders' competences profile rises by one. The proposed model predicts the chances of project suspension in relation to the independent variables. However, the significance of relations or associations, with a dependent variable assessment with the use of Mann–Whitney U nonparametric test and the choice of representatives, based on the level of correlation with a dependent variable, resulted in choosing only social competence with its adaptability and managing stress dimension. Table 7 shows significance values for digital and social competences.

Table 7. Competences 4.0 Relationship Measures

Measures of association	Eta	Asymp. significance (2-tailed)
Social competence: adaptability and managing stress during the pandemic	0.162	0.000
Digital competence: the use of computer in everyday work	0.063	0.042
Social competence: maintaining contacts and cooperation	0.055	0.038
Social competence: relations and emotions	0.048	0.216
Social competence: communication	0.034	0.245
Digital competence: work with online documents	0.032	0.246

Source: Poszytek (2021).

The proposed model predicts the chances of project suspension in relation to the above enlisted independent variables. Table 8 presents the results of only those variables in the equation which turned out to be significant, which means that the significance value is under 0.05.

Table 8. Significant predictors and their Exp(β) value

Predictors	β	Significance	Exp(β)
Cognitive competence: proactiveness, innovation, openness to challenges	-0.465	0.004	0.628
Social competence: adaptability and managing stress during the pandemic	-0.540	0.000	0.583
Only person managing the project	0.416	0.005	1.516
Professional time spent on project management:	-	0.004	-
Professional time spent on project management: 20–75%	-0.439	0.006	0.645
Professional time spent on project management: more than 75%	-0.970	0.010	0.379
Project budget: more than EUR 200,000	-1.433	0.000	0.238
Length of service at the institution where the surveyed project was implemented: 10 years and more	0.449	0.006	1.567
Constant	1.718	0.012	5.573

Source: Poszytek (2021).

The choice of predictors was determined by:

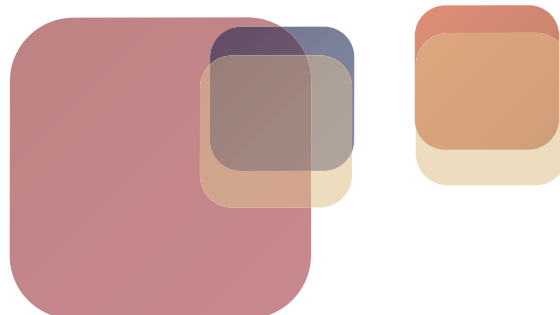
1. The assessment of the significance of relationship, or association, with a dependent variable with the use of Mann-Whitney U nonparametric test;
2. The choice of representatives on the basis of the level of correlation with a dependent variable.

Finally, it must be mentioned that the quality assessment of the above-presented research model was carried out in order to check validity of the results. Three tests were used here: Omnibus test of model coefficients, Hosmer and Lemeshow test and ROC (Receiver Operating Characteristic) test. All three tests proved validity of the research model.



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Learning mobility in international youth work during the pandemic

By Andrea Horta Herranz, Andreas Karsten, Ashley Pitschmann, Tanja Strecker

1. Introduction

This article stems from a presentation given at the Warsaw research seminar “Evidence-based approach in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps: Research in the time of pandemic”, organised by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System in October 2021. After a short presentation of the RAY-Network, we present key findings taken from RAY research from before and during the pandemic, together with an outlook of what might come after the pandemic.

As discussed at the seminar, timing is crucial and as the pandemic continues, research findings obtained just at its beginning can become obsolete quickly. Many organisations active in the youth sector have been struggling to maintain their activities, while many entities reached out with research invitations to study the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey fatigue increased, therefore, significantly in some contexts. In the RAY Network we seek to find a good balance to continue to produce research to inform evidence-based policies in this context.

2. RAY Network

The RAY (Research-based analysis of European youth programmes) Network is an open and self-governed European research network of National Agencies of the European youth programmes and their research partners. Founded in 2008 it counts currently 33 partners in 32 countries. The network conducts mixed-method research on international youth work and the European non-formal education programmes Erasmus+/Youth in Action and European Solidarity Corps. These European youth programmes focus not only on youth learning mobility, but also on cooperation for innovation among youth work organisations, on support for youth policy and for sports, among others.

Over the years, the research activity of the RAY Network has expanded considerably, in part through the inclusion of further partners, as well as the diversification of research projects, looking into more and more aspects

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KEYWORDS

international youth work, Erasmus+/Youth in Action, EU Solidarity Corps, RAY Network, non-formal education, informal learning, COVID-19

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of the EU youth programmes. The core part of our research are the monitoring surveys RAY-MON, monitoring the Erasmus+/Youth in Action programme, and RAY-SOC, its newly established equivalent for the European Solidarity Corps programme. Our database includes in total more than 100,000 fully valid responses by project participants¹ and more than 15,000 fully valid responses by project leaders² from 2007 to 2020. Most of the data was achieved in the time span from 2014 to 2020, with 56,691 fully valid responses from project participants, 11,484 from project leaders and 1,227 from project organisations. Moreover, we can draw on more than 5,000 thematic survey respondents, more than 1,000 interviews, more than 200 focus groups and more than 100 case studies, all conducted in the context of different RAY projects.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the RAY Network has initiated its first research project going beyond the scope of the European youth programmes and focusing on the European youth sector in general: RAY-COR, a research project on the impact of the corona pandemic on youth work in Europe³.

3. International youth work

3.1. Before the pandemic

Youth work is known as an ideal space for non-formal education and informal learning. International youth work, through its learning mobility formats, is supposed to offer additional advantages for young people, in particular opportunities to acquire and improve language skills and intercultural learning. Transnational research analysing the assets, but also the challenges and potential for improvement of international youth work in different settings is, however, mostly missing. Research evidence showing the advantages of international youth work could contribute to a better recognition of non-formal education and learning in the youth field and when it comes to international youth work and learning mobility. Findings regarding challenges and difficulties could help the sector to overcome these challenges and improve international youth work even further. The RAY Network is dedicated to closing this gap through its research, assessing if and

¹ Project participants: Youth workers, youth leaders, teachers or other actors who attended projects/training/activity within E+/YiA for/with youth workers/leaders, at least in an education/socio-pedagogic function, but frequently also with an organisational function. (Böhler et al., 2022, p. 16).

² PL: Project leaders/members of project teams: Youth workers, youth leaders, trainers or other actors who prepared and implemented YiA projects for/with young people or youth workers/leaders, at least in an education/socio-pedagogic function, but frequently also with an organisational function; normally, in particular in the case of projects with participants from two or more different countries, these projects are prepared and implemented by project teams with two or more project leaders. (Böhler et al., 2022, p. 16).

³ For more information on the RAY Network, our projects and findings, please visit our website: researchyouth.net.

up to which point the European Youth Programmes meet their youth-specific aims and studying the impact on specific aspects in depth. In the following parts we will describe the assets, but also some of the challenges and potential for improvement our research has identified so far.

Our research findings confirm that the Erasmus+ programme achieves its youth-specific aims:

To improve the level of key competences and skills of young people, in particular through learning mobility opportunities [...] is fulfilled with acclaim. The development of key competences and skills is very high for project participants and project leaders alike.

[Böhler et al., 2022, p. 27]

To promote active citizenship and participation in democratic life in Europe is another key youth-specific aim of the Erasmus+ programme. Our research shows that 96% of responding project participants improved their ability to get along with people who have a different cultural background, and 90% their ability to achieve something in the interest of the community. These skills are translated into action swiftly: 37% of respondents report that they actually became more active as citizens as a result of their participation in the programme, compared to their engagement before the project.

[Böhler et al., 2022, p. 33]

Regarding the aim “[t]o strengthen the role of youth organisations as support structures for young people, in particular through enhanced cooperation, [...] [o]ur research shows that effects of projects on organisations – and communities – are assessed to be positive by project participants and project leaders alike.

[Böhler et al., 2022, p. 36]

Regarding the youth-specific aim “to strengthen social inclusion and solidarity in Europe”, we can state that:

[...] the programme’s inclusion approach works. 88% of project leaders agree that their project contributed to supporting the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities or special needs in the Erasmus+/Youth in Action Programme (48% strongly agree, 40% agree).

[Böhler et al., 2022, p. 47]

In an inclusion-centered analysis of data gathered through RAY-MON from October 2017 to May 2018 in 31 countries and 26 languages we found that young people with fewer opportunities are generally included and, remarkably, their learning outputs are similar to and at times even higher than those of young people not identified as with fewer opportunities (Meyers, Mayerl and Fennes, 2020, p. 9). Nevertheless, our findings also show that certain issues with the inclusion of disadvantaged young people and young people with special needs remain.

At the same time, it is shown that while a growing share of project participants indicate previous international mobility experiences, the project participants with lower educational levels are least likely to have had such experiences (Böhler, et al., 2022, p.48). This may confirm that for this group of disadvantaged youth, the Erasmus+/Youth in Action programme offers a first chance to gain international experiences contributing to more social equality.

Many project leaders express a certain conviction that project participation has increased the commitment of their organisation/group and local community to include young people with fewer opportunities:

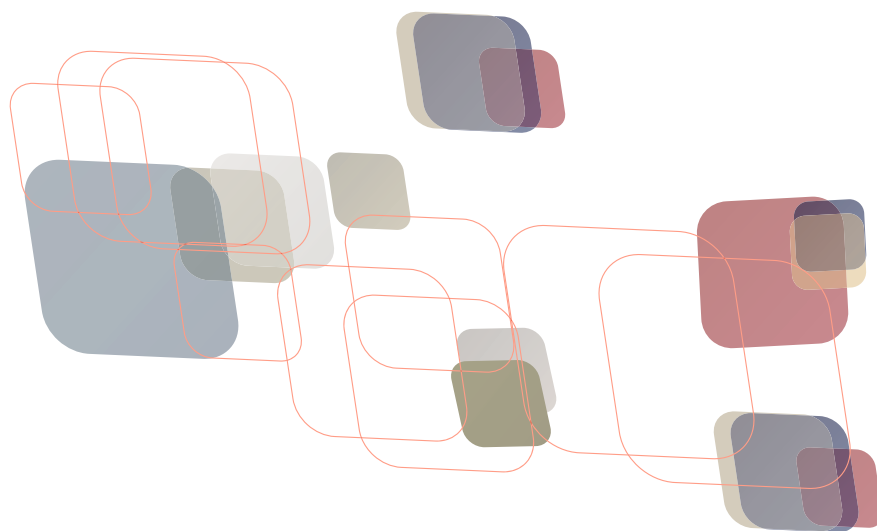
67% of the respondents in YWM⁴ projects and 66% in TCA⁵ 'agree' and 'strongly agree' that their participation in the project resulted in an increased commitment to include young people with fewer opportunities. In the other activity types even more.

[Böhler et al., 2022, p. 33]

If these assessments are correct, we can expect further increases in the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities in the future – not only in international youth work, but in youth work in general.

An increased awareness of the obstacles young people in general and disadvantaged young people in particular face might also lead to further support in tackling and overcoming these issues. In our research, project participants identified the main obstacles they are facing as “gaining access to work and employment (57%), followed by active participation in society and politics (34%), mobility (27%) and accessing education (23%)” (Böhler et al., 2022, p. 47).

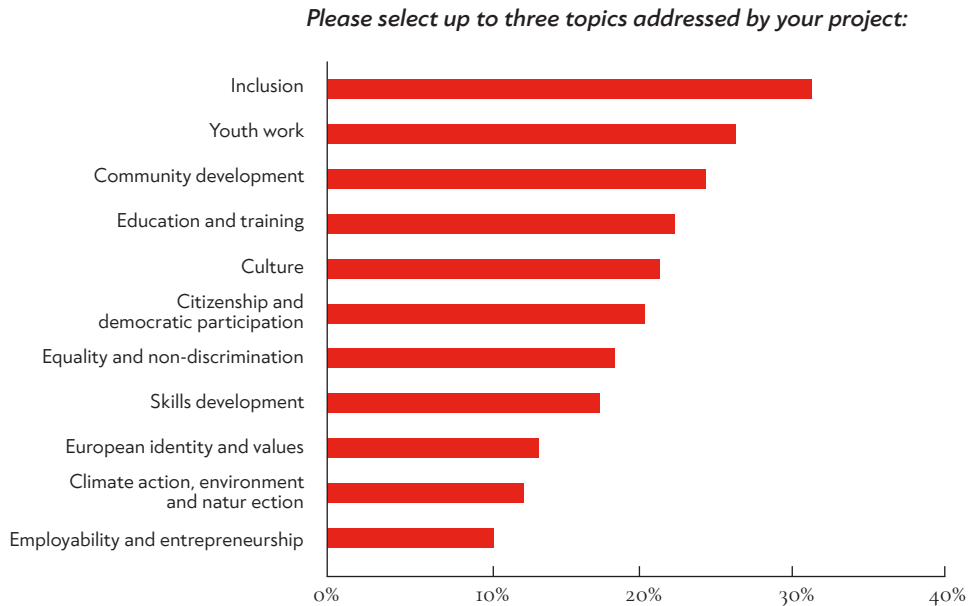
Beyond the youth-specific aims of the Erasmus+ programme, we can furthermore ask if the European youth programmes address main European challenges. In a survey conducted for RAY-SOC (Akarçesme et al., 2019), we found that 32% of organisations asked to select up to three topics they believe to address with their project indicated “inclusion”, followed by “youthwork” (27%), “community development” (25%), “education and training” (23%), “culture” (22%) and “citizenship and democratic participation” (21%). Though scoring less than 20%, “equality and non-discrimination”, “skill development”, “European identity and values”, “climate action, environment and nature protection” and “employability and entrepreneurship” were also marked by more than 10% (Figure 1). This shows that the projects address main European challenges.



⁴ Mobility of youth workers (Key Action 1).

⁵ Transnational Cooperation Activities.

Figure 1. Topics addressed in projects by project leaders (n = 3,548, multiple response)*



* % of cases: this figure only includes topics which were ticked by more than 10% of the respondents.

Source: Akarçeşme et al., 2019, p. 4.

Similarly, our findings confirm the frequent assumption that international youth work fosters intercultural learning. In the *RAY-MON Comparative Research Report 2014–2020* (Böhler et al., 2022, p. 22), almost 70% of the responding project participants indicated to have learned something about cultural diversity (see Figure 2).

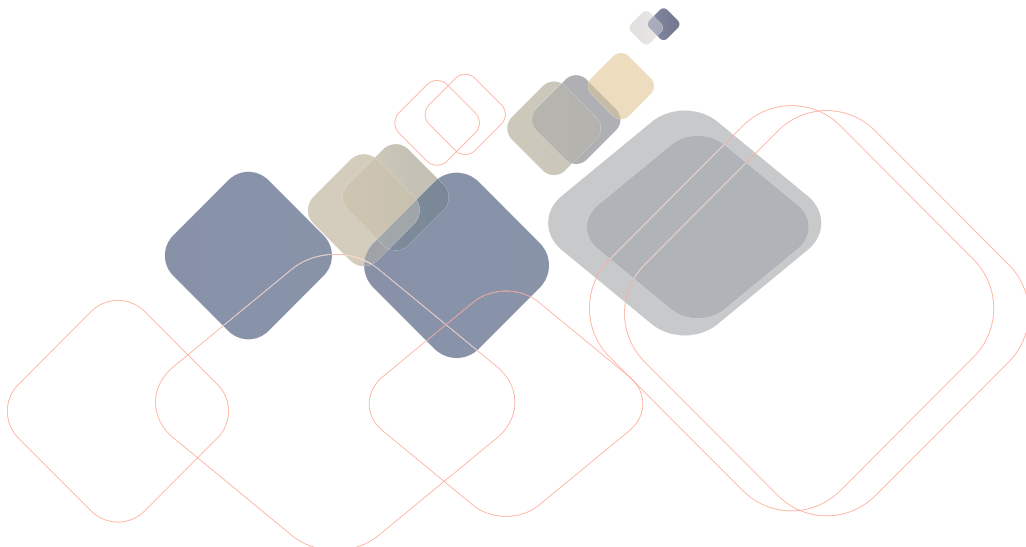
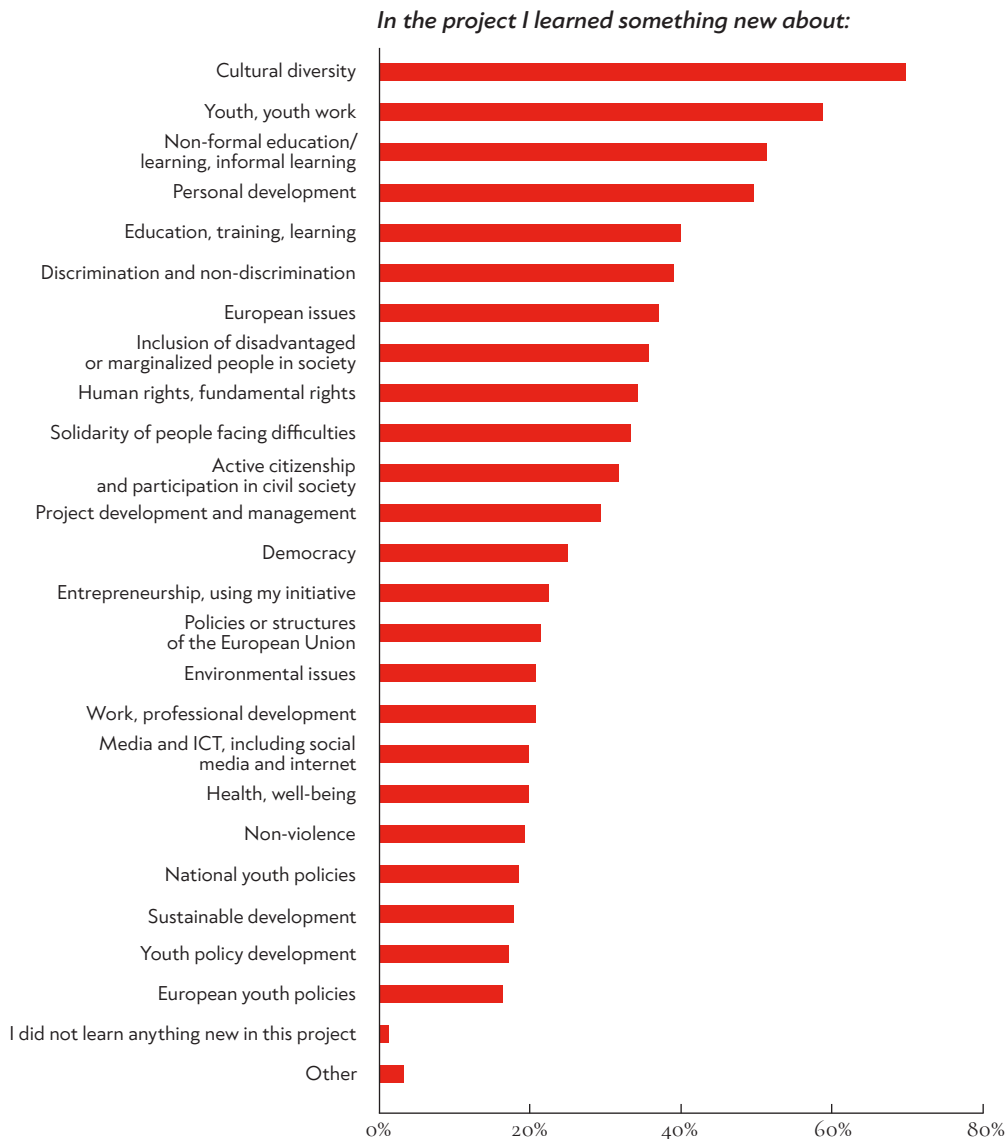


Figure 2. Knowledge acquired by project participants (n = 53,087, multiple responses)



Source: Böhler et al., 2022, p. 22.

Similarly, cultural diversity also ranked highest regarding skill development and for project leaders. For project leaders it was moreover the highest ranked impact on their organisation, in the sense of an “increased appreciation of cultural diversity in their organisation/group” (Böhler et al., 2022, p. 33).

RAY research confirms, furthermore, the crucial role of non-formal and informal learning/education in the competence development of project participants. Additionally, many project leaders are convinced to have improved their ability to provide non-formal education through their project:

Across all aspects of non-formal and informal learning/education, responding project participants selected predominantly high values when asked whether their competence had been strengthened: Between 83% and 90% 'strongly agree' or 'agree' across ALL activity types [...]. Project leaders⁶ assess these items even higher than project participants, ranging from 90% up to 95% across ALL activity types.

[Böhler et al., 2022, p. 25]

89% ('strongly agree' or 'agree') of responding project leaders assess that they increased competences for the provision of non-formal education.

[Böhler et al., 2022, p. 35]

RAY research furthermore looks into the following aspects in depth:

- learning & development;
- active citizenship & politics;
- impact on local communities & policies;
- accessibility and diversity;
- development of a youth work community.

While we found in all these fields positive impact and indicators for the durability of these effects, the self-assessed impact on personal development is particularly outstanding:

Overall, 97% ('strongly agree' or 'agree') of responding project participants report that their participation in the project has contributed to their personal development.

[Böhler et al., 2022, p. 27]

When comparing the learning effects described by the participants to the topics treated according to the project leaders, we find that participants also learn regarding topics that are not directly addressed in the project, showing that "learning effects go beyond the issues addressed in the projects" (Böhler et al., 2022, p. 21).

Regarding skills, cooperation in a team is the most confirmed skill among project participants across all age groups with an overall score of 95% (Böhler et al., 2022, p. 25). It is eye-catching that skills related to digitalisation (skill to produce media content on my own (printed, audio-visual, electronic): 66% 'strongly agree' or 'agree'; and skill to use smartphones, tablets, notebooks, computers, internet: 57% 'strongly agree' or 'agree') are among the ones project participants rate lowest, showing that issues with digitalisation were already present in the field before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

More potential for improvement becomes visible in the field of active citizenship and politics. Except for cultural diversity, which ranks exceptionally high (70%), knowledge acquisition regarding citizenship topics ranks between average and below average in comparison to others. Significant differences regarding the activity type are observed (Böhler et al., 2022, p. 31).

Regarding the impact on local communities and policies, our respondents draw positive conclusions: 75% ('strongly agree' or 'agree') of respondents of YWM projects and 76% of TCA projects confirm "effects

⁶ This forms part of a general trend as project leaders tend to indicate higher learning effects than project participants and also expect stronger impacts on the project participants' learning than these describe for themselves (Böhler et al., 2022).

of the participation/involvement in the project on the organisation/group/body” (Böhler et al., 2022, p. 35). These effects are positive, such as stronger commitment to include disadvantaged young people seen above or “a more intensive involvement in European issues” (Böhler et al., 2022, p. 33).

In a similar vein, positive effects for local communities are assumed, in particular for hosting communities (Böhler et al., 2022, p.33). With regard to the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities this agreement was, however, relatively small: “64% of PL [project leader] respondents indicate that the local community has become more committed to the inclusion of young people with fewer opportunities (32% ‘agree’, 32% ‘strongly agree’)” (Böhler et al., 2022, p. 33). While this indicates a need for further research to assess how to better foster the positive impact on local communities, project leaders tended to score the impact on the local community gradually higher over the different project cycles reaching in 2019 more than 80% on all items (Böhler et al., 2022, p. 36).

3.2. During the pandemic

COVID-19 is known to have affected everybody and “all areas of life” (Börner, 2021, p. 2), reaching the scale of a disaster, as “disasters affect the entire community, disrupt its daily functions and complicate or impede the work of local authorities and public facilities” (p. 10). For Sasse-Zeltner (2021, p. 158) the COVID-19 pandemic is “a global catastrophe consisting of different local disasters”, while Stok et al. (2021, p. 1) speak of “a worldwide systemic shock”. Importantly, this new crisis overlaps in the EU with previously existing crises like “the refugee reception crisis, but also with the financial crisis of 2008 or, even more general, with the crisis of the welfare state in the 1990s”, so it can be seen as “a crisis on top of a normalized crisis” (Börner, 2021, p. 6). Considering different scopes and varying impact on diverse target groups, it can also make sense to “distinguish between different coronavirus-induced crises (e.g., exacerbated social inequalities, a supply crisis, the crisis of public health, a lockdown-induced economic crisis and an anti-scientific populism fuelled by anti-lockdown protests)” (Börner, 2021, p. 12) or to speak of a “syndemic” to highlight the link to social inequalities (Shabbir et al., 2021). No matter how we name the COVID-19 pandemic in the end, its magnitude and intensity are out of question.

Though youth are expected to be among the most severely affected by the economic backlashes of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gustafsson and McCurdy, 2020) and lockdown-related mental health issues (Stok et al., 2021), it seems that most policies focussed so far mainly on other sectors of society (Gustafsson and McCurdy, 2020) and only include young people indirectly or in regard to formal education and work. Youth work and international youth work are widely ignored rather than being recognised as the precious ally they are in this recovery and leaving the sector without crucial institutional support (Böhler, Karsten, Pitschmann, 2020).

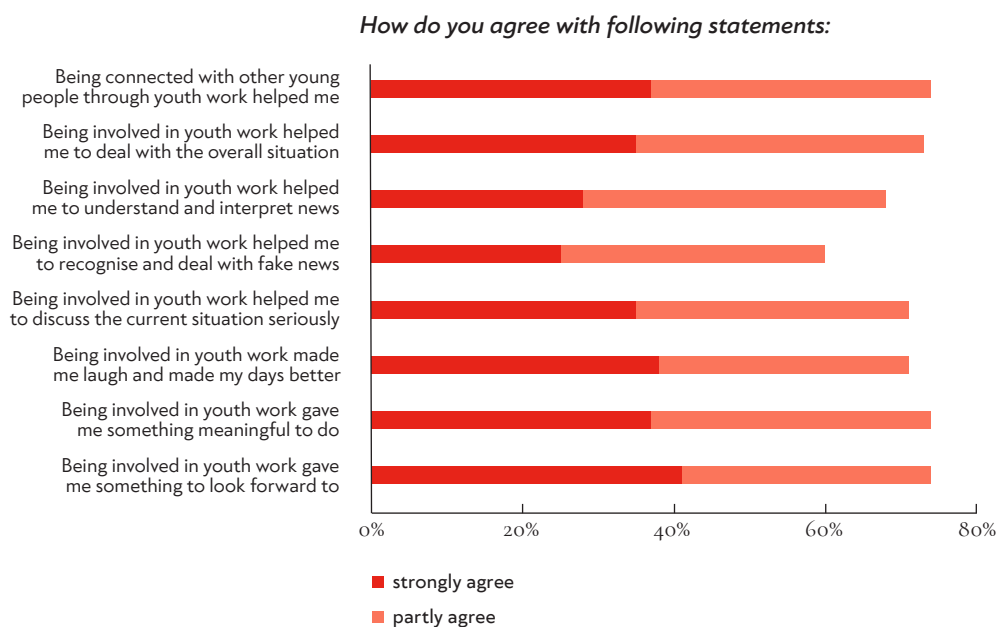
The RAY Network conducted for our project on the impact of the corona pandemic on the European youth sector two waves of online surveys, three literature snapshots, expert interviews and 39 national case studies and a media analysis. The initial monolingual survey (May 2020, 6 weeks) collected 938 valid responses, 560 from youth workers/youth leaders and 378 from young people participating and contributing to youth work. A multilingual survey launched in October 2020 with rolling data collection until early 2021 collected 1,097 fully valid responses by youth workers/leaders and 424 by young people active in youth work. National case studies were conducted in Austria, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Slovakia, and Turkey (Horta, Pitschmann, 2022).

Common findings of all instruments were how severely the pandemic impacts the EU youth sector and how issues with digitalisation and reaching disadvantaged young people aggravated throughout the crisis. However, we also saw different youth-led initiatives that confirm how active citizenship and participation continue to be

an important issue for young people as they fight misinformation and foster information sharing, community support, supporting employment and education and promoting development and resiliency (Pitschmann, 2020). Moreover, youth work represented an important back-up in difficult times for the young people still in reach (Böhler et al., 2020). While confirming these general findings, the national case studies offered further insights into the successful youth work responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Horta, Pitschmann, 2022).

In spite of the severe impact of the lockdown in the first phase of the pandemic that forced youth workers to cancel and postpone activities and their critical reflections on their difficulties to adapt their work to different formats (Horta and Pitschmann, 2022), our first survey already showed towards the beginning of the pandemic how youth work continued to offer an important support to young people (Böhler et al., 2020). While fighting to adapt, youth work continued to offer a great work and was, in many senses, more needed than ever.

Figure 3. Young peoples' agreement with statements depicting youth work's function as a back-up in difficult times (n = 378, young people involved in youth work)



Source: Böhler et al., 2020, p. 11.

Abiding with pandemic regulations made face-to-face activities difficult and forced youth workers to not only remain continuously informed about the changes in regulations (already a difficult task mentioned as hindering the successful adaptation to the changed circumstances) and to adapt their planned activities in due course, but often led to a deletion of the international aspect of international youth work, realizing planned activities locally instead. While international youth work was paused or limited to online environments, youth workers sought to record young peoples' needs and respond to newly emerging needs, such as beginning to work more than before the pandemic with mental health support. In spite of all the issues they were facing, youth workers managed to continue their work:

[Y]outh organisations in our sample were able to continue offering spaces for young people to meet, bond and experience personal growth. They also continued providing guidance and much-needed help for young people in critical situations and they were able to advocate for the needs of the youth that emerged during the pandemic.

[Horta, Pitschmann, 2022, p. 13]

Sadly, it was particularly the young people most in need of such support and back-up that fell even more out of reach of youth work during the pandemic:

Youth work provides connection, education, stimulation, guidance and resources that are invaluable for young people in general, for young people with fewer opportunities in particular and during a pandemic even more. Sadly, it is exactly these young people who need it the most who have had the biggest problems staying in touch with youth work during the pandemic.

[Horta, Pitschmann, 2022, p. 8]

For many youth workers the pandemic led to a difficult situation with significantly more work overload and severe financial difficulties – the most often mentioned hindering condition – while experiencing important emotional burdens themselves. Though financial difficulties had already been a topic in RAY research before the pandemic, the case studies for RAY-COR show that in many contexts these issues increased, as funding was cancelled, future funding became more insecure and costs of online activities were insufficiently recognized by funding entities (Horta, Pitschmann, 2022)

[A]dapting a service or activity to a new online format can easily require the same or even more work and resources than performing the service or activity in its original format.

[Horta, Pitschmann, 2022, p. 10]

While the previously existing issues with digitalisation and online youth work made the adaptation at first more difficult, the pandemic appeared as a booster for digitalisation, a catalyzer that will likely have a permanent positive impact on youth work in Europe. Throughout the pandemic many of these new offers appeared ad hoc, but critical reflection on the pros and cons allows youth workers to identify issues with online environments and digital tools that need to be addressed in the future. While youth workers ask for digital, personal and organisational capacity building in general, challenges related to online formats and digital tools are a key concern, possibly because the pandemic allowed them to gain first experiences that enable them to discern their needs, while in other fields training needs remain more vague.

[O]rganisations ask for training for their members where they may learn about digital skills and the hazards of digital work; they ask for information about and access to useful online tools; and they ask for support in producing digital activities and combining them with face-to-face ones, so that young people can benefit from the advantages of both formats.

[Horta, Pitschmann, 2022, p. 12]

The specific steps required to improve crisis management do not yet seem to be very clear, but they are likely to involve fostering more effective organisational structures and organisational functioning, as one national report suggests should be done. They may also involve training individual youth workers.

[Horta, Pitschmann, 2022, p. 12]

As previous RAY research had identified several of the issues that then came to affect youth work severely during the pandemic, ongoing research to map challenges and goals can be helpful to offer structural improvements and up-to-date training to youth workers. This could not only increase the sector's resilience in the event of future crises, but could also improve the everyday working.

[O]rganisations ask to be supported in building capacities that will make them not only more resilient in the face of another crisis, but also better equipped for their everyday functioning.

[Horta, Pitschmann, 2022, p. 14]

Other recommendations link to the observed conditions hindering or supporting successful youth work responses to the pandemic. In particular, successful collaboration with local governments and administration together with an approach to keep administration simple while ensuring proper funding are crucial. At least in times of crisis, the crisis-induced work overload could be reduced by a “simplification of bureaucratic processes”. Another lesson to be learned from the pandemic is that budget changes need to recognize the additional expenses caused by the need to adapt projects to different formats. As mentioned in our case study report, organisations struggled due to budget cuts as the costs of adapting to online environments were not considered (Horta, Pitschmann, 2022) – for instance it cannot be rightly assumed that an activity will be cheaper when international travel is cancelled. Project based funding posed severe challenges to youth work in times of lockdowns, showing, once again, that a systemic change towards more stable funding is needed to increase youth work's resilience in times of crisis and beyond.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a shock for the European youth sector, but can be, just as any crisis, also an opportunity for positive change (Koos, 2019). While the pandemic already led to much learning in the sector, in particular regarding digitalisation, it could be further used to identify and address structural issues:

[T]he field and its workers struggle with bureaucracy and need professionalisation, more visibility, more recognition (official and unofficial) and a faster entry into the digitalised world; organisations, especially the larger ones, need better structures and better internal communication; projects need proper funding that finances all of their components and workers an amount of work that does not overload them.

[Horta, Pitschmann, 2022, p. 13]

In particular, the findings highlighting once again the important role youth work is playing in supporting young people and fostering their personal and professional development through non-formal and informal learning could finally lead to an increased recognition of youth work and non-formal education.

3.3. After the pandemic

While our research offers many recommendations for the European youth sector and shows how the pandemic caused a “steep learning curve” of surviving organisations (Horta, Pitschmann, 2022, p. 13), it is difficult to predict future developments. On the one hand, digitalisation seems to be here to stay and some organisational networks experienced an important push through the pandemic, fostering the development

of an international youth work community. On the other, some networks were rendered relatively inactive, for instance because of the almost complete abolition of international youth work in some contexts, fomenting the fear that they may disappear completely. (Horta, Pitschmann, 2022)

The immense social challenges expected to follow the pandemic (Alalouf-Hall, Grant-Poitras, 2021) could foster a focus on local and national interventions, as international collaborations are often considered a “luxury” or a nice surplus, but not at the core of the youth work organisations’ missions (Akarçeşme et al., 2022). This could lead to a decline in applying organisations and young people themselves might be less able to participate if they and their families face economic hardship, leading to a further decline in the participation of disadvantaged young people. Asan (2021, p. 7) does, however, not expect “a big decrease in the travel mobility of young people in the post-pandemic period”, mentioning in particular “mobility of students, volunteers, language trainees, cultural exchange program participants, backpackers, and digital nomads” (Asan, 2021, p. 2). While this could mean a simple return to pre-COVID-19 conditions, the wish to compensate for the missed opportunities during the pandemic could even lead to an increase in participation, in particular in programmes covering the travel costs of the young participants, as the pandemic likely affected their liquidity negatively. The European Solidarity Corps programme with its volunteering component could, furthermore, gain importance if 1) it is institutionally recognised as an instrument to foster European solidarity and integration or 2) the increase in young volunteers observed at the beginning of the pandemic (Alalouf-Hall, Grant-Poitras, 2021) continues at higher levels (Strecker, Pitschmann, forthcoming).

4. Conclusion

In this article, we have presented RAY data on international youth work from before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have showcased ways in which youth work has suffered as well as ways in which it has changed and flourished. Our analyses show up a range of learning points and potential for better support and improvements in the future, while also underlining the significant resilience of youth work and its special value in times of crisis. In particular the recognition of youth work’s importance, increased and more stable funding, research to identify new challenges as quickly as possible and an array of training opportunities to adapt to identified challenges are considered useful future directions.



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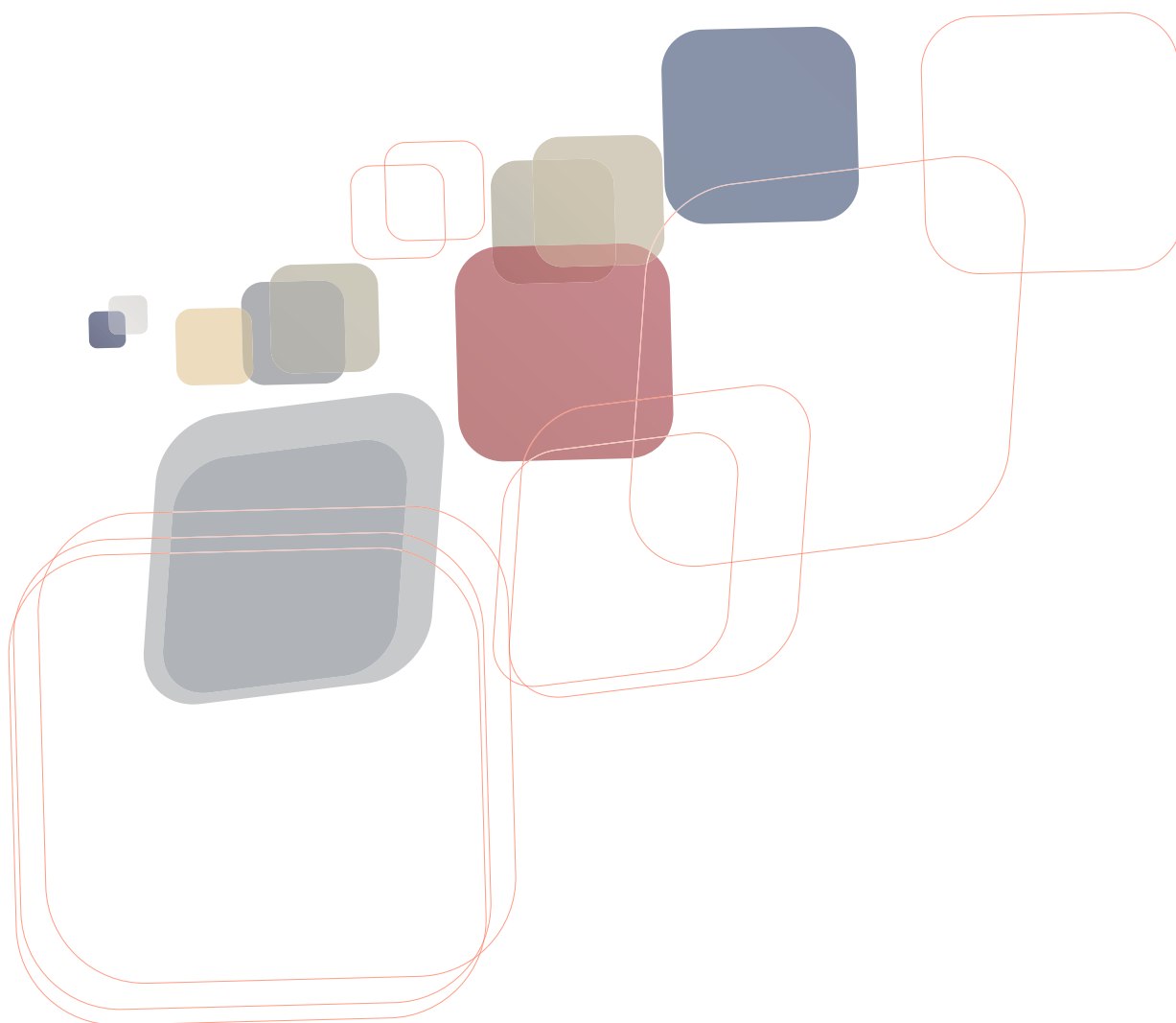
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The COVID-19 pandemic and youth organisations in Turkey: challenges and youth work responses

By Asuman Göksel¹

1. Introduction

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has considerably affected all aspects of life, including youth work and learning mobility activities, all over the world and across Europe. Youth organisations were no exception to face numerous challenges. Throughout the first year of the pandemic, not only the youth work activities, but also daily functioning of the youth organisations faced serious restrictions, which could lead to, in some cases, suspension of the activities. However, there were also some cases, where youth organisations developed and implemented responses in a way to adjust to and resume their learning mobility activities within the extraordinary circumstances created by the pandemic.

This study aims to identify and analyse the challenges faced by the selected youth organisations in Turkey in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic; their youth work responses to ensure continuation of their youth work activities and organisational functioning and potential success factors for these youth work responses.

After presenting the data collection and research sample, the study briefly overviews the official COVID-19 measures as a background and identifies the challenges that they created for the youth organisations in Turkey in the period from March 2020 to February–March 2021. The next section documents the youth work responses developed by the youth organisations to cope with those challenges in five categories, namely “asking the youth”; “adapting face-to-face activities to the conditions of the pandemic”; “lobbying for mainstreaming youth as a priority”; “digitalisation”, and “developing new projects on the effects of the pandemic on young people”. The paper concludes with a general overview of those youth

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KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, youth organisations, youth work, Turkey

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work responses to key out potential success factors, namely engagement with young people, institutional capacities, flexibility and cooperation, to inform future youth work and learning mobility activities in Turkey and in Europe.

2. Data collection and research sample

The qualitative data for this study were collected as a part of the impact of the corona pandemic on youth work in Europe (RAY-COR) research project of the RAY Network². The overall aim of the RAY-COR research project is “to document and analyse the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth work in Europe, including the European youth programmes, and the response of youth work across Europe to the pandemic and its effects”³. Module 5 of RAY-COR is particularly designed as case study research to explore successful responses from youth organisations to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people and youth work across diverse youth work contexts in Europe.

For the RAY-COR national research in Turkey⁴, the qualitative data collection was funded and implemented by the Centre for EU Education and Youth Programmes⁵ (the Turkish National Agency), member of the RAY Network since 2012. The qualitative data were collected through explorative interviews, to be supported by additional data gathered from social media, newsletters, blog posts and similarly fast-paced publication channels of the youth organisations in the research sample.

The research sample includes youth workers and youth leaders from five youth organisations in Turkey, directly organising, offering and/or implementing youth work. All of those youth organisations are non-governmental organisations, established as associations, and one of them is an umbrella organisation with 59 youth organisations as members. The youth organisations were selected in line with the criterion sampling model (Patton, 1990: 176), where the major selection criterion was the high level of activity in youth work in Turkey in the first year of the pandemic.

The youth organisations in the research sample provide youth work activities at local, national and international levels. They are all actively benefitting from the Erasmus+ programme, and even had the on-going Erasmus+ and European Solidary Corps projects in the first year of the pandemic. They also had other activities funded by own resources or several donors in the same period. In terms of their main working fields and geographical locations, they reflect diversity of youth work practices in Turkey, with high level of experience in the field. The list of the youth organisations in the research sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. List of youth organisations in the research sample

Organisation	Number of interviewees	Province	Interview date
Organisation #1	2	Gaziantep	11 February 2021
Organisation #2	5	Ankara	12 February 2021
Organisation #3	2	Malatya	16 February 2021
Organisation #4	5	Eskişehir	16 February 2021
Organisation #5	5	İzmir	19 February 2021

² For more details about the RAY Network – Research-based Analysis of European Youth Programmes, researchyouth.net [access 3.06.2022].

³ researchyouth.net/projects/cor [access 3.06.2022].

⁴ The RAY-COR Module 5 Country Report for Turkey can be found at bit.ly/3zbgM7D [access 3.06.2022].

⁵ ua.gov.tr [access 3.06.2022].

The data collection had to adopt a remote interview methodology due to the pandemic and all of the interviews were conducted online via Zoom as group interviews in the period of 11–19 February 2021, almost by the end of the first year of the pandemic. Those exploratory interviews included two to five representatives from each youth organisation in the research sample and they lasted 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were voice-recorded and no video recordings were made. The consent of each interviewee for personal data use was received both in written and verbal forms.

The question set used for the interviews included questions to explore youth work responses of the youth organisations and identification of the reasons for their potential success factors. For this aim, the interviewees were first asked about the main effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth work, young people and on their organisations and about how an understanding on the possible responses to such effects was reached. Further questions investigated the main intentions, activities and outputs of the youth work responses developed by the youth organisations, their key principles and components and whether or not the intended responses were considered as successful. A final set of questions intended to explore the conditions which affected positively or negatively the accomplishment of those responses and any further needs of the youth organisations to strengthen the capacity of youth work during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Challenges faced by the youth organisations due to the pandemic

The very first finding from the qualitative data is that the youth organisations in the research sample faced various challenges in the first year of the pandemic. Most of those challenges were directly related to the official measures taken in Turkey, as it is the case at a global scale, and they seriously affected the functioning of the youth organisations and provision of their youth work activities. Thus, before presenting the challenges faced, the content and timing of the COVID-19 measures in Turkey between March 2020 and March 2021 needs to be presented as a background.

In Turkey, the very first COVID-19 case was announced on 11 March 2020 and a series of country-wide measures followed it. These measures can be summarised both in terms of their content and their timing. Regarding the content, among many others, some of the immediate measures which had effects on youth work and youth organisations can be categorised into the measures related to international and domestic travel, education, mobility including the lockdown and curfew measures and work arrangements. In addition, those measures in the first year of the pandemic can be grouped into three periods⁶: March – June 2020 where strict measures were taken; June – November 2020 where the measures were relatively eased and November 2020 – March 2021 where some strict measures were reinstalled.

In the first period (March – June 2020), one of the first measures was the suspension of flights reciprocally with some countries and expanding shortly to many others, including the European countries. On 27 March 2020, not only all the international flights were cancelled, but also domestic intercity travels were subjected to special permission of public authorities. Secondly, on 25 March 2020 all the education institutions were suspended, and soon after it was announced that education at all levels, including the universities, were to be resumed as remote education. Thirdly, several lockdown and curfew measures were adopted, for different age groups and for the overall population. On 21 March 2020, citizens over 65 were banned from the streets and on 3 April 2020 the ban was extended to children and young people under 20. These bans were also

⁶ COVID-19 measures implemented in Turkey between March 2020 and March 2021 were summarised from: bit.ly/3zrgVnG; bit.ly/3NvTxth; bit.ly/3O31uWA; bit.ly/3zoZCDu.

accompanied by curfews for the whole population, during the weekends, evenings or national holidays. Fourthly, some remote and flexible working arrangements were introduced at public and private sectors. Thus, in the first period, the international and domestic mobility was severely restricted; social, educational and work life was suspended or transferred into remote methods.

In the second period covering June – November 2020, the measures started to be eased. In May 2020, the “gradual normalisation” process was announced and accordingly, domestic travel restrictions were removed. The academic year was completed through remote education, but remedial education for the secondary schools was transferred to in person setting at the end of August 2020 and in September 2020 the primary and secondary schools started with in person education for certain grades and for some days of the week. The universities were let free to decide on the method of education, and in many universities, the autumn semester from October 2020 onwards started as remote education. Thirdly, the lockdown for different age groups was removed on 3 June 2020, and many social activities and encounters were allowed with some arrangements through reopening of the restaurants, cafes, sports facilities, beaches, shopping malls etc. by 1 June 2020. Finally, the public institutions restarted to work as before/in their usual mode (until 26 August 2020), although some private and civil society organisations continued working remotely. Thus, in the second period “gradual normalisation” process allowed for some degree of mobility, accompanied by several preventive measures such as mask, physical distance and hygiene.

With the peeking of COVID-19 cases in November 2020, many measures were reinstalled to take affect by 20 November 2020. Although domestic travelling was allowed, curfew for overall population was re-announced for the weekends and evenings during the week; people over 65 and those below 20 were once more restricted to go to streets except three hours in the afternoon; and the same age groups were also prohibited from using public transportation. Education was announced to be resumed through remote mode at different education levels. Working hours and working conditions at the public institutions were already rearranged ensuring flexibility in August 2020, which allowed them to work remotely. Thus, in the third period of the first year of the pandemic, mobility was limited again, until the re-opening to start by 1 March 2021 as announced by the Minister of Health.

The explorative interviews show that different types of official COVID-19 measures in different periods throughout the first year of the pandemic in Turkey considerably restricted the functioning and activities of the youth organisations in the research sample, which can be discussed in four categories.

The first challenge was created due to limitations to mobility, especially in the first period, with regards to physical encounters. Youth organisations, whose human resources and target groups usually depend on university students, faced difficulties when the students had to leave the city of the university to their hometowns when the universities shifted to remote education. In that sense, not only the human power of the youth organisations, but also the volume of their target groups decreased. In addition, it was mentioned that international travel restrictions also negatively affected the European youth activities, especially the European Solidarity Corps, due to cancellation of travel plans or new visa regulations. Lastly, limitations to mobility were observed to decrease the chances for the teams in the organisations to meet in person for some months, and it slowed down their daily and regular functioning.

A second challenge was observed in relation to the lockdown and curfew measures. A great deal of the activities, which were already planned in in-person settings, were mentioned to be cancelled, delayed or transferred to other locations since the facilities (where the activities would take place, such as the youth centres or refugee centres) were closed down due to the pandemic. Even in the cases where the facilities were kept open such as the hospitals (where volunteering activities were already taking place), the health risks for the vulnerable beneficiaries were mentioned to prevent the organisations from proceeding with their activities.

A third challenge was related to the ban of general assembly meetings of the associations, which was valid from March 2020 to March 2021⁷. Most of the interviewees voiced the negative impact of not being able to convene general assemblies on the functioning of the organisations. The interviewees did not only consider those meetings as places where the future activities were planned and new board members were elected, but also as a venue for ensuring participation into policy making and deliberation among the members of the organisation. In addition, in the period when the general assembly meeting could not be held, it was stated that some of the decisions could not be made or new members could not be admitted to the organisations.

A fourth challenge was voiced as financial difficulties. Due to uncertainties occurred in the course of the pandemic, the interviewees stated that they had some delays of contracts and payments from their donors, which created difficulties in terms of sustainability of their activities and payments to the staff members. Another financial difficulty was mentioned as the emerging additional costs, mostly due to the increasing need for digitalisation. The majority of the interviewees stated that they had to purchase technological equipment or paid membership dues to the digital platforms to be able to improve their technical infrastructure. Thirdly, some interviewees stated that their organisations had to manage some crisis situations, which created new financial costs especially for the on-going activities, for example with regard to travel, accommodation, preventive equipment or visa arrangements of the participants/volunteers in their activities.

4. Responses

The qualitative data show that in spite of the unexpected challenges due to the pandemic and although they experienced a short period of shock and inactivity, the youth organisations in the research sample also managed to act and mobilise their efforts to cope with the negative effects of the pandemic on their functioning and youth work activities. From the explorative interviews, five categories of responses can be identified: “asking the youth”, “adapting face-to-face activities to the conditions of the pandemic”, “lobbying for mainstreaming youth as a priority”, “digitalisation” and “developing new projects on the effects of the pandemic on young people”.

4.1. Asking the youth

The youth organisations in the research sampled all agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected young people and created some specific challenges especially with regard to education and employment. However, they also acknowledged that youth population was heterogeneous and different needs and problems of the young people due to the pandemic were to be identified and responded to as part of their youth work understanding. With such major concerns, all the youth organisations in the research sample mentioned that in order to identify their needs, they directly asked young people about their problems and needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such an effort can be grouped into two types of actions: those which targeted the members, volunteers and target groups of the organisation and those which targeted a wider youth population from a rights-based perspective.

Firstly, all the youth organisations were observed to have kept their contact with their members, volunteers or target groups and asked them about their problems and needs. As such, they were observed to sustain their connection with young people and help them when needed.

Secondly, the qualitative data show that there were initiatives from a right-based perspective to reach out to a wider youth population. One of the examples was the COVID-19 Problem Map⁸, which was a country-

⁷ ÖNEMLİ DUYURU: Ertelenen Genel Kurul Toplantıları, bit.ly/3NYQeuq.

⁸ covid.go-for.org.

-wide web-based initiative. The Map aimed to monitor, make visible and respond to the violation of rights that young people experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic in way to provide space for evidence-based advocacy at the local and national levels. The Map foresaw voluntary participation of young people who had experienced (or witnessed) violations in the course of the pandemic in different fields of daily life such as education, employment, health, housing (including university dormitories) etc. The interviewees from the organisation which started the initiative also mentioned some limitations for the efficient implementation of the Map. One of those was the hesitation of young people to indicate their problems on the web. Another one was the difficulty of matching the young people and local youth organisations for acting against the violations, which was mentioned to be constrained by the inability to create data partnership with the local youth organisations and lack of extra funding to do so.

Another initiative aiming to reach out to a wider youth population was the documentary entitled “Youth Rights during the Pandemic”⁹, which intended to identify and increase the visibility of the needs and demands of the young people throughout the pandemic. The documentary was stated to point out to heterogeneity of youth population, hence that of the problems and challenges that they face, by presenting the various types of impact of the pandemic on young people and their struggle with the challenges in that period. The qualitative data show that the documentary was a product of cooperation with some experts and public institutions and of the financial support of Sivil Düşün¹⁰.

4.2. Adapting face-to-face activities to the conditions of the pandemic

The qualitative data show that as the COVID-19 pandemic caught youth organisations in the middle of their on-going projects and activities, the youth organisations had to transfer a great deal of their activities to online platforms. However, there were also three youth organisations in the research sample, which decided to resume some of their in-person, face-to-face activities, particularly during the relative opening up in Turkey by June 2020.

On the basis of the qualitative data, the key aims to continue with the face-to-face activities can be categorised into three: to respond to the demands of the target group (for example young people proposing organisation of activities); to respond to the perceived needs of the target groups (for example learning activities for more vulnerable groups such as the Syrian refugee children and young people to eliminate the disadvantages of distance education) and to take initiatives backed up with the willingness and availability of the participants of the events (for example asking and taking the consent from the participants for the activities to be attended in an in-person format). The main motivation was stated to be the organisations’ belief in the benefits of the face-to-face activities compared to digital ones, as this type of activities provided more efficient contact and communication with and among the young people through adoption of more interactive methods.

For the face-to-face activities, a number of challenges were observed from the qualitative data. Many interviewees mentioned that the arrangements and preparation for the face-to-face activities during the pandemic required additional efforts and time. This was mentioned to be mainly due to the need to rearrange the physical spaces or to reschedule the programmes of the activities in a more flexible way in line with the official COVID-19 measures. Those extra measures were reported to create two consequences for the youth organisations: additional and unexpected costs and the need to cooperate with public institutions.

⁹ The documentary is available online (with English subtitles) at bit.ly/3x5mRzV [access 3.06.2022].

¹⁰ Sivil Düşün is “a European Union programme supporting active citizens and civil society organisations throughout Turkey” with a rights-based perspective; sivildusun.net/about-us [access 3.06.2022].

Additional and unexpected costs were mainly observed to result from the COVID-19 health and safety measures. For example: the need to purchase protective equipment such as masks and disinfectants, to arrange extra hotel rooms for the participants, to cover the taxi costs of the participants to avoid their public transportation or the pre-payments for accommodation and lodging with the risk of cancelling the activity in case of new last minute COVID-19 measures were all mentioned as different types of financial risk factors for the youth organisations organising face-to-face activities during the pandemic.

The need to cooperate with public institutions was stated as another factor for facilitating the organisation of face-to-face activities. Many interviewees indicated that support from public institutions helped them reach better facilities and resources. For example, some youth organisations in the research sample were observed to cooperate with the municipalities or ministries to use their meeting facilities or youth centres for the activities. On the other hand, the experience of the youth organisations in working with and for young people was mentioned as a critical beneficial factor for the public institutions especially in times of crisis similar to that of the pandemic. It should also be stated that the support from the Turkish National Agency and European Commission was also appreciated as a facilitating factor.

4.3. Lobbying for mainstreaming youth as a priority

With the outbreak of the pandemic, many different donors in Turkey initiated calls for projects or schemes for the civil society organisations to respond to and alleviate the negative effects of the pandemic on different segments of the society. One of the organisations in the research sample identified that although young people were quite negatively affected by the pandemic, the youth organisations' range of action was considerably narrowed down and their access to funds had been quite limited beyond the Erasmus+ and ESC Programmes, those new calls from the donors did not set any priorities for young people. Accordingly, as a response, the same youth organisation worked for mainstreaming youth as a priority in such project schemes and in new call for projects.

Lobbying activities included a series of meetings with the international and national donors in Turkey, in an effort to ensure mainstreaming youth as a priority in the existing call for projects. In addition, where the calls for projects were considered not to be sufficiently inclusionary, public statements were published to attract the attention of the donors. Such lobbying activities were reported to create positive outcomes such as the announcement of special calls and/or organisation of information sessions for the youth organisations, which eventually helped increase the use of funds by the youth organisations in Turkey.

4.4. Digitalisation

The qualitative data show that digitalisation has been the most emergent trend among the youth organisations in the first year of the pandemic. Without exception all the youth organisations in the research sample benefited from and developed various online and digital instruments. Three separate but interrelated domains for digitalisation can be observed: digitalisation of the youth work activities; digitalisation for organisational functioning; and digital support activities to other youth organisations and youth work in general.

The first domain is the digitalisation of the youth work activities of the organisations in the research sample. In the qualitative data, there were many examples of transferring regular activities to online and digital platforms, although some of the organisations simultaneously continued face-to-face activities. The digital youth work activities include, but are not limited to, online language and speaking clubs, information meetings, career days, thematic trainings within on-going or new projects and publications. Although almost all of the interviewees stated that they believed in the benefits of in-person interaction

with young people, they also considered digital activities as an opportunity not to lose contact with young people and to continue supporting them, to sustain the activities of the organisations rather than suspending or cancelling them; to expand the outreach of the activities from local to national or international levels and to sustain organisation's visibility.

However, the interviewees also pointed out to some disadvantages of digital activities and methods used in this type of activities. One of the disadvantages mentioned was the need to redesign and adjust activities and exercises to a digital setting, which sometimes meant that a more applied learning approach had to be replaced with a theoretical one. Another disadvantage was the difficulty of ensuring interaction and active participation of the participants on the digital platforms. Many interviewees stated that they had to adjust non-formal education methods and instruments to a digital setting. A final disadvantage was mentioned as the need for equipment and computer programmes/applications for the online/digital activities. Although many youth organisations managed to acquire those (by purchasing, sharing or borrowing equipment; or, by using free of charge or less costly platforms/programmes), they were still considered to create additional costs for the youth organisations.

The second domain is digitalisation for organisational functioning. All the youth organisations in the research sample seemed to benefit effectively from the use of the online and digital instruments in times of the pandemic to sustain their organisations' daily working routines. Two examples were the online team meetings and digital archives. Online team meetings were mentioned to enable all the team members to stay in contact, regardless of their actual location and keep the daily working routine. The digital archives, which were already established by the organisations to store the documents, reports, contacts etc. of the organisation, were also stated to be a facilitating factor for the continuity of the organisational functioning during the pandemic.

The third domain is the digital support activities to other youth organisations and youth work in general. There were some examples in the qualitative data which show that the youth organisations developed new and innovative digital instruments to support the youth workers, youth organisations and youth work in general. One of the examples is the production of supportive content through video series on different topics of youth work (such as rights-based youth work, international youth mobility, volunteering, participation (with)in youth organisations etc.) to empower the youth workers by providing examples of effective digital content production¹¹.

4.5. Developing new projects on the effects of the pandemic on young people

The qualitative data show that some of the youth organisations can also develop new activities or projects to cope with the negative effects of the pandemic on young people. For example, one of the youth organisations in the research sample prepared a KA347 – Structured Dialogue project, entitled “Post-Pandemic Youth Adaptation Scenarios Project”¹² and the project was funded by the Turkish National Agency. A specificity of this project was its reference to the post-pandemic period, and the role assigned to young people in developing and discussing together the future scenarios on how youth adaptation would be required after the pandemic. The project aimed at making young people be heard in the process of developing a vision of post-pandemic globally and locally, preparing them to post-pandemic conditions, helping them think about and initiate opportunities for their future, empowering them to develop policy options and mobilising the policy makers to take vision of youth into consideration.

¹¹ 10 episodes of *Versus* series are available online at: youtube.com/channel/UCBoyVKppKZr2jbsjftAJuA.

¹² More information about the project can be found at: bit.ly/3xet6Cz [access 3.06.2022].

5. General overview: factors for success

Although the youth organisations in the research sample faced various challenges due to the pandemic, a brief overview of the explorative interviews show that they could also act quite skillfully in coping with those challenges in the first year of the pandemic. For this aim, they initiated and implemented youth work responses to overcome the problems of young people as their target groups, to sustain their activities and organisational functioning and to support and cooperate with youth workers and other youth organisations.

The qualitative data show that the pandemic created some new and unfamiliar working conditions; however, the youth organisations in the research sample could activate their potential to adapt themselves to the changing conditions and develop new ways of youth work provision. The analysis shows that those youth organisations adopted new agendas on the basis of their perception on the emerging needs of the young people, they acquired new skills, such as online/digital skills, they enhanced their crisis management mechanisms and they diversified their funding prospects. The qualitative data point out to four main interrelated reasons for the success of the youth organisations' youth work responses in the first year of the pandemic.

Engagement

The youth organisations in the research sample were observed to be engaged with young people before the pandemic and had intentionally managed to remain engaged with them during the pandemic. Staying in contact with their members, volunteers, participants and target groups, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic and developing new tools to identify their needs and demands helped develop an informed awareness, knowledge and vision about the pandemic related problems of the young people to be targeted through youth work activities.

Institutional capacities

The qualitative data show that the youth organisations in the research sample had already had institutional capacities to develop youth work responses to overcome the effects of the pandemic on their functioning and activities. After a short period of shock and inactivity, those organisations were observed to have mobilised their human resources and capacity to resume their youth work activities. In this process, their level of institutionalisation can be observed as a factor for the creation of immediate responses. For example, the teams in the youth organisations could undertake the responsibility for putting the activities back on track, rescheduling and redesigning the on-going activities for the forthcoming months, developing new activities to cope with the impact of the pandemic, adopting new (online and digital) instruments etc. All these show that the level of institutionalisation in the youth organisations helped them activate a high adaptation capacity to the new conditions created by the pandemic. The qualitative data show that most of the youth organisations already included digitalisation in their agendas before the pandemic or developed digital support mechanisms within their organisational structures such as digital archives or communication channels, which considerably helped them to efficiently manage the process during the pandemic. However, it was also acknowledged by the youth organisations in the research sample that digitalisation was sometimes underestimated regarding the efforts it may necessitate, as digitalisation required to go beyond the sole ownership of equipment and to further develop technical capacity and know-how in terms of adapting a new understanding for digital activities. Finally, more institutionalised youth organisations were observed to be able to develop crisis management mechanisms when they faced financial difficulties due to the pandemic and achieved access to different funds for the new activities.

Flexibility

The youth organisations in the research sample were also observed to have benefitted from flexibility to sustain their activities. Flexibility relates both to their institutional capacities and capacities of their donors to rearrange the support mechanisms. On the one hand, the qualitative data show that, owing to their institutional capacities, the youth organisations could internally reorganise their work, their activities and their human resources. On the other hand, they were also observed to ask for and receive the consent of their donors for flexible implementation of the funding rules in their on-going projects. Achieving flexibility in general can be observed to help the youth organisations make changes in terms of the form of activities (for example from face-to-face to online), in terms of the participants of the activities (for example less or more participants) and in terms of project costs (for example shifts between budget lines).

Cooperation

The qualitative data show that the youth organisations searched for opportunities of cooperation and solidarity in the course of the pandemic, not only for their existing activities but also for the future activities. For the on-going activities, new venues of cooperation with the local public institutions are considered to enhance the opportunities for the continuation of activities, for example by benefitting from the facilities or resources of the public institutions. Cooperation with other youth organisations was also achieved, both in terms of know-how and technical equipment, as a factor to create an enabling environment for youth work during the pandemic. The youth organisations in the research sample could also mobilise their already established contacts with experts and networks in the youth field and communicate and cooperate with their existing international/European partners to ensure continuation of existing activities, develop them further or design new activities together.

It is not difficult to anticipate that not all the youth organisations have gone through similar experiences in Turkey during the pandemic. However, those factors which contributed to the success of youth work responses of the youth organisations in the research sample during the first year of the pandemic could be a starting point to identify the areas of support for all the youth organisations in Turkey, both during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic period. Capacity building towards a more institutionalised, sustainable organisational structure and functioning seems an important priority. Secondly, more support for digitalisation could be provided for all the youth organisations, as digitalisation seems to continue as a trend also in the post-pandemic period. Such support should not only consist of technical training and equipment support; but also, it should enhance provision of non-formal education and youth work practices through digitalisation. Thirdly, youth organisations should be equipped with skills to further develop their crisis management mechanisms to be able to better cope with any potential risk situations in the future. Lastly, support can also reconsider adoption of some degree of flexibility in implementation of youth support schemes for all the donors, including the Erasmus+ and ESC programmes, both at the programme level or during its implementation at the national level.

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Erasmus+ during the COVID-19 pandemic – experiences of online education of Erasmus students in Poland

By Ewa Krzaklewska, Karolina Podgórska

1. Introduction

International didactics during the pandemic period has undergone a fundamental change: while the online mode of teaching and learning has been appearing within the higher education system already before the pandemic, the pandemic restrictions moved in one moment the whole didactics to the virtual world. The online teaching and learning mode meant a necessity on the side of teachers and students to adapt to new conditions without any preparation, which resulted in the ad-hoc initiatives and sometimes an actual discontinuation of teaching. On the other hand, we witnessed a period of intense creativity and self-initiative to continue learning in those challenging and new circumstances (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska, Modebadze, 2021). The aim of this article is to reflect on the experiences and challenges of the online education for Erasmus students during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, also considering the perspective of teachers who deliver courses for Erasmus students. Building on the research financed by the Foundation for the Development of the Education System conducted in Poland in 2021¹, we will look into the evaluation of the online education from the perspective of Erasmus students and teachers, as well as the impact of the online mode of learning and teaching on the international experience more generally. What this unique year of Erasmus calls into question is the relevance of virtual Erasmus framework – if the education can take place online, is physical mobility necessary for achieving goals of internationalisation?

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KEYWORDS

Erasmus students, Erasmus+ programme, virtual Erasmus, online education, COVID-19

¹ The full report *Erasmus+ during the COVID-19 pandemic* is available on: bit.ly/3mhYKIZ.

2. Erasmus in the context of the online education in Poland

Restrictions and limitations introduced in Poland meant that classes in both the summer semester 2019/2020 and the winter semester 2020/2021 were predominantly conducted with online methods. In general, an obvious effect of the pandemic was a noticeable drop in the number of students choosing to participate in the Erasmus+ programme. The pandemic crisis had a critical impact on number of incoming students to Poland only in the year 2020/2021. In the previous academic year 2019/2020, students have arrived in Poland for the second semester in February 2020, just before the outburst of the pandemic. In previous years, there were usually 10,000 students coming to Poland for the first semester and 5,000 for the second semester (Fila, Rybińska, Sot, 2021). In the year 2020/2021, there were 3,846 students registered in the first semester and 2,985 in the second semester (ibidem). Thus, the numbers dropped significantly from about 15,000 to about 7,000. Also, many students decided to postpone their mobility to the second semester, with hopes of an improved situation in the summer semester.

The main difference between the two semesters concerned the way in which e-learning was introduced – the summer semester 2019/2020 was marked with an unexpected change of situation, whereas the winter semester 2020/2021 was planned to be solely online. The semesters differed in terms of the attitudes of the international students. In the summer semester, the vast majority of students were already in Poland, and after the pandemic started, their decisions to continue with the student exchange were threefold:

- they decided to stay and continue their studies in Poland;
- they decided to return to their home country but continue their studies in Poland remotely;
- they decided to return to their home country and discontinue their studies in Poland.

In practice, the online Erasmus groups at the universities consisted of students staying in Poland as well as in their home countries. The situation in the following year was different – students arrived in Poland in pandemic conditions, and their decision to come included considering the severity of COVID restrictions in Poland in comparison to those in their home country. To sum up, when analysing the impact of COVID-19 on student mobility, it is crucial to observe the changing circumstances during the pandemic years in the analysis of data and planned interventions, noting the adaptation to the epidemiological situation and changing restrictions levels around Europe (Krzaklewska, Şenyuva, 2020).

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3. Methodology of research

The study (Krzaklewska et al., 2021), conducted between February and May 2021, consisted of online survey and focus group interviews directed towards Erasmus students studying in Poland in the year 2020/2021, as well as the individual in-depth interviews with academic teachers who conduct courses for Erasmus students.

The survey sample consists of 960 respondents – Erasmus students who studied in Poland in the winter semester of academic year 2020/2021. From 25 March to 30 April 2021, we received 1,024 survey responses, but eventually the sample included 960 questionnaires of those participants who have answered to at least two parts of the survey. Among those, 930 students filled in the whole questionnaire. As the survey was directed to students from the winter semester (3,846 students), the response rate was 25%. In comparison to other online studies, this is a relatively high level of participation, which may indicate a vivid interest of students to share their experiences.

The focus group interviews gathered 28 students visiting six universities in Poland: Jagiellonian University in Kraków (6 students), University of Łódź (5 students), Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin (4 students), Poznań University of Economics and Business (4 students), Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń and University of Zielona Góra (joint discussion of 9 students). Focus groups were conducted online in April and May 2022. The respondents studied at different levels, PhD included. They came from an array of faculties, but with good representation of students from economics and business, psychology, political sciences and physics, but also from mathematics and computer science, geology, law, history, sociology and English studies.

The study involving academic teachers was qualitative in nature. Twelve individual in-depth interviews were conducted online in February and March 2022, with university teachers who teach classes for the Erasmus+ programme students. The teachers were recruited from each of the three different university centres: University of Łódź, Poznań University of Economics and Business, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. This sample comprised universities of different sizes and with different numbers of Erasmus students – large, middle-size and small. The respondents mainly represent social sciences and humanities, business studies, but also law and chemistry.

4. Living in Poland or virtual Erasmus?

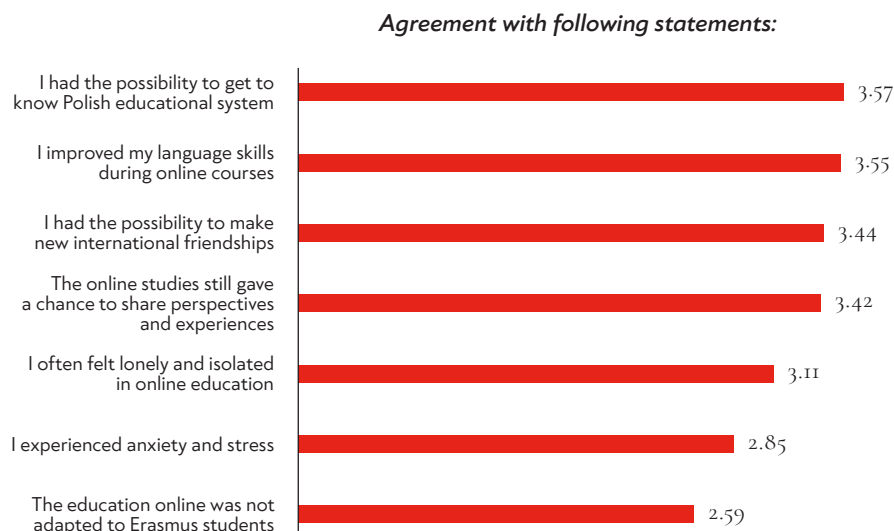
During the pandemic, all universities were obliged to introduce the remote/distance learning form as compulsory (“virtual Erasmus”). Therefore, students could choose between physically moving to and studying in the destination country, or studying online – thus remaining in their home country or other location, but participating online in the courses and seminars. Nonetheless, among Erasmus students in Poland, most students decided to actually move to their Erasmus destination country, with a small number of students choosing virtual Erasmus. Among the survey respondents, 79% of the students decided to come to Poland and declared that they stayed in Poland throughout the whole winter semester. 13% spent one part of the semester in Poland and another in their home country. Only less than 8% of the students participated in the classes in remote forms only. The distance to the Erasmus destination country was an important variable. Thus, Erasmus students from EU countries more often decided to stay in Poland (slightly more than 80%) than students from non-EU countries (slightly more than 70%). Among non-EU students, more people decided to study online without leaving their home country, or chose the option of spending some time in Poland

and some in their own country. The decision of not leaving the country of origin may have been potentially based on foreseen administrative difficulties with obtaining visa, in particular in the pandemic circumstances, as well as difficulties related to travel in case of lockdowns. This indicates that virtual Erasmus becomes an important option for those who may face logistical or technical difficulties in regards to travel or visa.

5. Online education – perspective of the Erasmus students

During the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the students' attention was directed towards the educational dimension of their stay abroad, in the light of limited accessibility of social and cultural activities. It is visible when comparing the study results with pre-pandemic evaluations of the Erasmus stay, when study experience was usually evaluated lower than the overall experience of the stay abroad (Alfranseder, Fellingner, Taivere, 2011). The Erasmus students in our study gave a very similar evaluation to overall stay abroad and study experience – in both cases, about 70% of the surveyed students expressed their satisfaction with the stay abroad, as well as with studying under the programme (the average mark was 3.92 on the scale from 1 – very dissatisfied, to 5 – very satisfied, compared to the mean mark of 3.84). The focus group interviews revealed the centrality of the studying experience – education has become a core of students' narrative of study abroad. In fact, similarly for students during the first lockdown in March 2020, the online education was an important basis for everyday activity and it was structuring their day in isolation (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska, Modebadze, 2021).

Figure 1. Evaluation of studies online at the host university (1 – strongly disagree, 5 – strongly agree)



Source: Krzaklewska et al., 2021, p. 58.

The experience of different educational system – even if in its online version – was appreciated by the students. In fact, as seen in the Figure 1, students rather agreed that they had the possibility to get to know the Polish educational system, even if all education was conducted online. The teaching styles used

by the Polish professors were often different from the ones used by the professors in the students' home universities. The quotes below indicate in most cases an interactive style of teaching, value of working in groups, direct approach of teachers. The interactivity of courses and classes was a critical factor within online education, with passive lectures being evaluated negatively.

I am sure that online classes here are much more interactive than online Spanish classes. The online Spanish classes that I had before coming here were such that the professor talks, and nobody speaks, it was just a regular lecture. But here, it is much more interactive, and for example, when the professor tries to explain the history of Poland, you feel more a part of the country. I think that is the difference.

[Erasmus student, male, Poznań]

This interactivity, while being important for learning dynamics, is also tightly linked to processes of socialisation with other Erasmus students, which is at the heart of their study abroad experience (Cuzzocrea et al., 2021). The students rather agreed that online classes assured the opportunity to share perspectives and experiences. This was, for example, the case in some particular subjects where international dimension is critical for learning, such as political studies. In such cases, the possibility to share views and critically relate to other perspective is a core of learning process:

I want to agree about the faculty of international and political studies because it is really diverse and the courses that I am taking are taught in English. And I think most of them have Erasmus students and from different backgrounds, maybe from Asia, Africa and also from Europe. [...] it is interesting when somebody ask a question about the pandemic, let us say, and they relate to politics or international relations. And it is interesting how every student sees how his government or his country deals with such an issue, is like a different issue on the different any or any other like issues.

[Erasmus student, female, Kraków]

In fact, as the survey data shows, the socialisation aspect of education was present with students being able to some extent to make new international friendships. Nevertheless, there was an effect of isolation and loneliness that students experienced when studying online – the experience of speaking to a black screen was described by one student as very demotivating – and the social aspect of studying was missing, with very particular effects on motivation to study as well as mobility outcomes. Meeting new people is an important aspect of studying abroad, also linked to its intercultural dimension, and university is a main place for making new acquaintances and maintaining social relations. Online classes do not constitute such a comfortable space for meeting new people, in particular for those whose classes – as in the example below – are mostly passive lectures, without group work and opportunities for discussion:

And what she said is actually correct, you know, because so many friends kept telling me "why do not you go and meet people". I asked, "where am I going to meet people", like you want me to go to the park, and when I see a guy or some girl walking, you just want me to stop them and start talking, you know? So, when I have attended classes, everybody's cameras were switched off. Everybody's microphone were switched off. [...] You do not have any sort of conversation with anybody. How am I supposed to, you know, socialize? And especially for a few months. So I think it is difficult.

[Erasmus student, male, Kraków]

Also, there was a share of students who experienced anxiety and stress during online education. As focus groups revealed, these could be linked, among others, to technical issues resulting from using diverse learning platforms, internet connection, lack of quiet place or room for participation in online education (e.g. in case of sharing a room in a dormitory), issues with communication between students and teachers. Some negative comments also included the uneven engagement of class peers, which turned out to be demotivating for teachers and students alike.

While the students expressed regret that they cannot participate in “real” face-to-face classes, at the same time, some of them have actually highlighted the positive sides of online education – including lack of fear to speak up online or ability to travel while studying. This positive side of virtual Erasmus can be beneficial for those who need to move between locations.

Given the circumstances, I think that it is very structured and well-organised. I really like that everything is online, it is like life, we still have interaction. I also think that maybe a positive thing is that because we do not have cameras on, it is very anonymous, and people tend to ask more, because they are not afraid of others' opinion, I guess.

[Erasmus student, female, Poznań]

A very important and non-negligible aspect of Erasmus stay is the language element – in fact, learning or practicing a foreign language is a central motivation for Erasmus exchange participation. Indeed, among those studying in Poland, improving foreign language competency is the second most often selected motivational factor (chosen by 34% of the students). In the case of Poland, this applies less to the local language (Polish) than to English as the lingua franca of Erasmus students. Even if online classes constitute a challenge for interactions, the students were still rather on the positive side in regards to the impact of online classes on their language skills.

To sum up, most students believed that education online was adapted to Erasmus students. We also need to consider that the expectations towards online education were probably not very high, as it was the second semester of the online higher education mode across Europe. The continued education was also seen in other studies as a stabiliser in an unstable and uncertain reality (Czerska-Shaw, Krzaklewska, Modebadze, 2021) – with the deprivation of many activities, mostly of social character, the education was providing international students with a feeling of continuity, and was a base of their mobility experience. However, as we can now observe, most universities have returned to their on-site activities, and it would be interesting to see what is left from this deep dive into online experience of the higher education system.

6. Online teaching during the pandemic – teachers' experiences

The transition to online teaching primarily meant using different tools for learning. At the beginning of the pandemic, teachers had more freedom in the choice of online teaching platforms and tools (e.g. Zoom, Google, Skype, Moodle) and classes were not always interactive. Some classes were conducted through sending materials to be worked on, homework assignments, chat discussions. This was possible due to the lack of centralised coordination from the universities' management on how to conduct classes, or due to technical possibilities and personal technical skills. The selection of didactic methods was related to the subject taught, the type of classes and the level of applicability.

For this purpose, the academic teachers used various sources – from videos created by themselves, through videos available on the YouTube platform, to the use of virtual resources of various public institutions. The following tools were used during the classes: multimedia presentations, Word and PDF documents, interactive tools such as whiteboard or jamboard and shared documents. Some respondents, however, purposefully gave up the use of technology and interactive tools. The mode of work of the students has also changed since the pandemic and the implementation of online methods, as they more often performed individual than group tasks. The biggest problem with online teaching remained elusive. The emotions of participating in “live” culture cannot be easily substituted for, however, in some cases teachers were trying to reach the goal of cultural inclusion.

Participation in culture had to be replaced by other forms. And here we provided students with access to multimedia materials, to various virtual tours of Polish museums. We gave them access to films with subscriptions and captions in English. We provided access to various online cultural events, which were also made available free of charge on platforms.

[teacher 8]

It is difficult to say whether the methodology of the classes with Erasmus students differed significantly from other online classes. However, any differences or variations may be explained by a more interactive approach to teaching practices used during Erasmus classes. The most important method for the lecturers was academic discussion. In their statements, the teachers stressed the importance of exchanging international experiences. In the respondents’ opinion, the exchange of experience is fundamental to the teaching practice of Erasmus students.

One of the unexpected consequences in the obligatory online teaching during the pandemic was an increase of technical skills of the teachers. Each of the interviewees emphasised that the period of limited traditional teaching has enforced, in a certain way, efforts to improve command of the remote teaching aids, and this knowledge will stay with them forever. Perhaps this is a generational experience which has also, in the long run, made it possible for many teachers to test, and sometimes to refute, myths related to the difficulties in the so-called e-learning (interestingly, this word is practically never used in the discourse in the context of distance teaching in the present situation). This issue involves the experience of working with students from the Erasmus+ programme, but it is also being widely discussed in the context of the comprehensive experience of distance or hybrid teaching during the pandemic period.

The respondents pointed out that they had familiarised themselves quite well with remote communication tools used in didactic activities, such as MS Teams, or the Moodle platform, so that they would be able to use some of their abilities also after the restrictions are lifted. In this context, they mentioned forums and knowledge databases – repositories and chats (but not online exams, which entail a major problem related to mutual trust). They also presented the logistic and functional advantage of using such tools – the ability to shape the curriculum flexibly was noticed not only with regard to time, but also in terms of the learning dimension (the materials or didactic strategies are easily accessible in the future).

So for example if I have some classes that I have to make up for, we can meet online. For example when I go abroad to attend the conference, now I do not have to call my classes off, I can run the class online from where I am staying at.

[teacher 1]

7. The challenges of online teaching during the pandemic

Student activity was the biggest challenge of the online classes. Teachers had great difficulty in engaging students, but students also disapproved of the low engagement of some students during the courses. This low engagement could have resulted from the lack of social aspect of studying. In fact, the lack of social dimension of education was a great challenge from the students' perspective, as revealed in the focus groups. It is connected to motivational factors in regards to learning as well as being closely linked to group dynamics. Similarly, teachers noticed that the lack of out-of-class socialisation impacts negatively class dynamics and thus learning outcomes.

Another problem highlighted during our research was the lowering of teaching standards, connected on the one hand with the use of less and less professional sources during online classes, and on the other hand with students' expectations. As teachers confessed, Erasmus students sometimes expect a more lenient approach from teachers than, for example, foreign students coming to Poland for their entire studies. On the other hand, some students complained that teachers do not expect much commitment on the side of Erasmus participants or provide them with very basic knowledge, which was disappointing for some more ambitious students.

For me, however, it is one of the first observations that an Erasmus student is a completely different student from a full-time student. [...] sometimes I have even encountered such a demanding attitude, [...] that they should be treated on different terms, obviously more liberally for them. Well, because this is in general a state of mind, something more than the process of studying. I think that this is quite common in their attitude and it translates into the fact that they put less effort into classes, they are less, less obligatory, absolutely the attendance is worse.

[teacher 4]

During the classes, the mutual contact between the participants and the teacher was deprived of the visual component. The biggest problem, according to the respondents, was the cameras being switched off on the students' side. While in the summer semester this was often explained by technical problems, in the winter semester it usually resulted from the students' reluctance to show their faces. Due to such behaviour, the interactive component of the online classes suffered. The inability to observe the non-verbal part of communication made it difficult to establish an informal conversation and relationships, which in turn reduced the comfort of the classes. The teachers attributed the aforementioned problems with student engagement during the classes precisely to the lack of cameras, which in their opinion increased the level of anonymity. Actually, similar voices came from students who also complained about other students' cameras being turned off.

The important challenge in online pandemic teaching is the multidimensional role of the teachers. They often tried to provide, apart from course knowledge, various forms of support to foreign students. This support was of a wide nature – from technological to psychological. The respondents mostly felt responsible for the well-being of their students and tried to provide the necessary assistance or refer students to the right institutions or persons. Technological support consisted of giving instructions related to logging into platforms, signing up for online classes, and sometimes even acting as an intermediary to gain access to the network.

Psychological support meant building a positive climate, pointing out the positive sides of the situation, diagnosing students' well-being, showing interest in their affairs and discussing extracurricular topics.

The respondents tried to be partners for their students. For many of them, this type of support was new and they tried to fulfill this role as best as they could, although none of the respondents mentioned having received training in this area. In contrast, Erasmus students often required psychological support due to the separation from their families and being outside their home country (cf. Czarska-Shaw, Krzaklewska, Modebadze, 2021).

They keep writing to me although I did send to everyone the email addresses and to all teachers, but they still keep on writing to me instead of communicating with each other.

[teacher 12]

The organisational dimension of support meant sharing information related to the pandemic or information from other administrative units. Some of the respondents, in addition to their role as teachers, also functioned as faculty Erasmus coordinators, which involved helping with all matters related to the study programme and course completion (for Erasmus students as well as for other teachers who teach classes with them). In extreme cases, they were almost a single-person service point for Erasmus students. Students also valued that friendliness and openness of teachers, as well as their general availability.

8. Conclusions

With social life opportunities being limited and travelling to other foreign countries being complicated and restricted, the studying environment retained student's attention and became a basis for their intercultural learning. Education was in general evaluated quite positively and as rather adapted to Erasmus students, allowing at least to some extent to get to know the education system of Poland and even allowing to practice foreign language (more often English than Polish). Here, we come back to the question of the validity of virtual activities and we conclude that with students willingness to be mobile, there is little evidence for opening up towards virtual Erasmus. Most students, as well as teachers, believed in the value of being in another country and experiencing diversity, even if under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions it was also a limited experience. Virtual Erasmus was rather seen as an emergency solution that could be maintained as an additional alternative to the most desired physical mobility. Nonetheless, the reflections on the suitability of virtual learning as a space for intercultural contact, in the case of limited contact beyond class, are very important and they should be used to discuss this issue also in the case of physical classes.

The teachers' experience during the pandemic was varied. They appreciated the flexibility of remote teaching and acquiring new skills, both technical and methodological, also useful in the future work. On the other hand, the respondents complained about lower quality of contact with students, fewer possibilities to work individually with them, lack of provision of assistance, as well as lower level of students' motivation, worse learning results, fatigue and burn-out caused by online teaching. To answer the challenges of online teaching, the "logistical" proposals for improving online Erasmus education emerged during the research. The suggestions concern e.g. formalisation of the requirement for turning the cameras on (which, in relation to teaching classes in a foreign language, is particularly important, since it allows to identify situations where something was not understood or misunderstood by students) or the creation of conditions and technical support for professional video recording, which should be made available to students in the case of STEM faculties (e.g. recording experiments in a laboratory), as well as the availability of the university's streaming equipment and tools, so that the teachers do not have to run classes only with the use of computer cameras in their own homes. Another technical proposal suggests organising class time in a flexible way:

it is difficult to teach remote classes, that in principle last 90 minutes, since the focus and attention span of the participants is difficult to maintain in such a lengthy time frame. All these experiences and suggestions could be used for future limitations in Erasmus traditional teaching.

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The challenges of distance education (the case of Armenia)

By Marina Galstyan

1. Introduction

Education is an area led by quality, equity, accessibility, ethics and other commitments, which guide the activities of education specialists and reflect the expectations of education beneficiaries, as well as obligations of the states towards their citizens. The level of fulfilment of those obligations by education systems largely depends on education policy and its implementation by participants of educational process: managers and administrators of education, teachers, students and parents. The COVID-19 pandemic emphasises the importance of realisation of the education policy in such challenging times. Despite all the efforts, during the COVID-19 pandemic education systems around the world experience exceptional disruptions and struggle to achieve good outcomes in terms of quality of education, justice and inclusion. The disruptive effect of the pandemic in some cases continues and may become worse due to inaccurate planning of education policy in the times of pandemic and/or lack of its implementation in the absence of appropriate support and guidance (Hanson et al., 1997; Heng, Sol, 2020). This article explores the effectiveness of education policy for the case of Armenia in the time of the pandemic, challenges of distance education and the quality and effectiveness of educational services provided by state secondary schools according to assessments of different groups, including youth.

2. Theoretical and methodological basis of the article

During the COVID-19 crisis, distance learning was the only viable alternative that ensured continuation of the educational process (Ulus, 2020). It has provided students from all over the world with varying degrees of opportunity to continue their educational process and has allowed different societies to continue to educate their young generation, turning them into knowledgeable and skilled workforce in the future, which is important for the promotion of the economic growth and the solution of national, regional and global issues (Hanson et al., 1997).

Many international studies prove that having access to the internet and technical means by youth, as well as teachers' skills and their training

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KEYWORDS

distance education, digital education, youth and education, sociology of education, education policy, education in Armenia during COVID-19

in online educational tools had a direct impact on the quality and accessibility of distance learning. While there is no common definition and concept of distance education, different theorists emphasise some aspects of distance education.

Thus, distance education is defined as institution-based formal education where the group of learners is separated, and interactive communication systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructions (Hanson et al., 1997). It is an educational process in which a significant portion of learning is conducted by someone who is distanced from the learner's territory and/or time.

Distance learning is planned as a systematic activity which includes selection of teaching materials, preparation and presentation of didactic materials, as well as control over and support of the learning process of students, and which is achieved by overcoming the physical distance between the teacher and the student by using one or more appropriate technical means (Keegan, D., 1986).

The widespread implementation of distance education¹ created a need to study and analyse the Armenian experience with this form of massive education. This research has been conducted by the Civic Youth Center with the Center for Educational Research and Consulting between September and November 2020 and aimed to identify challenges and issues related to realisation of education rights in Armenia at the time of COVID-19. The research particularly explores the effectiveness of education policy during the pandemic, the quality and effectiveness of educational services provided by public secondary schools according to assessments of different groups, and challenges of distance education.

Research questions are:

- To what extent were teachers and students prepared for distance learning?
- What are the reasons for students to participate/not participate in distance education?
- What was the effectiveness of education policy and educational services during the pandemic?
- What are the main challenges of distance education?

For the analysis of challenges of distance learning during the pandemic in Armenia, data from the following sources obtained between September and November 2020 have been used:

- Secondary analysis of the survey on remote education in Armenia². All quantitative data and figures used in the article originate from this survey;
- Qualitative interviews with educational area experts and policy-makers;
- Document analysis¹ – legal acts, statistical data, sectoral analysis, reports;
- Content analysis of educational pages in social media, namely on the Facebook platform, processed with the MAXQDA software.

For Facebook group selection, the following criteria were used:

- they are special interest groups devoted to the relevant segment of education;
- they are major groups in terms of significance and number of users;
- they have been active in the time period covered by our research;
- they are not secret groups.

¹ According to UNESCO (2020) report, distance learning is a term often used synonymously with online learning, remote learning, e-learning, distance education, correspondence education, external studies, flexible learning, and massive open online courses (MOOCs).

² *Report on the Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Education Policy in the Conditions of the Epidemic* (2021) Available (in Armenian) on bit.ly/3NfLz7t [access 5.01.2022].

Table 1. Sampled Facebook groups

Name/ Link	The date of creation	Group members	The n of group members
Union of Armenian Teachers (name in Armenian: Հայ ուսուցիչների միություն) facebook.com/groups/Union.of.ArmenianTeachers	03 May 2018	Teachers / other school staff (school head / deputy school head)	10,366
Primary School Teachers (name in Armenian: Դասվարներ) facebook.com/groups/362458940527103	20 April 2013	Primary school teachers	9,600
School, clubs and tutoring (name in Armenian: Դպրոց, խմբակներ, պարապմունքներ) facebook.com/groups/206123233154275	17 October 2017	Mainly parents	8,700

The results of the quantitative online analysis allowed to get information on the attitude of different education actors and their and assessment of separate components of distance learning. The content analysis of educational pages in social media, registered on the Facebook platform (and processed with the MAXQDA software), gave an opportunity to better understand the opinion of the communication actors on distance education and the messages they convey.

On social platforms, where groups of teachers and parents debate, interesting features of distance education are mentioned that would be difficult to reveal with quantitative surveys or other methods of sociological research. Social media provide an intriguing opportunity for people to express their opinion, which is very appealing in terms of self-determination and allows them to deliver their messages to the audience (Varis, 2014).

Beneath you may find a summary of the study results, divided into sections:

- teachers' and students' readiness for remote learning;
- students' participation in remote lessons;
- effectiveness of education policy and educational services in the times of COVID-19;
- challenges of distance education during COVID-19.

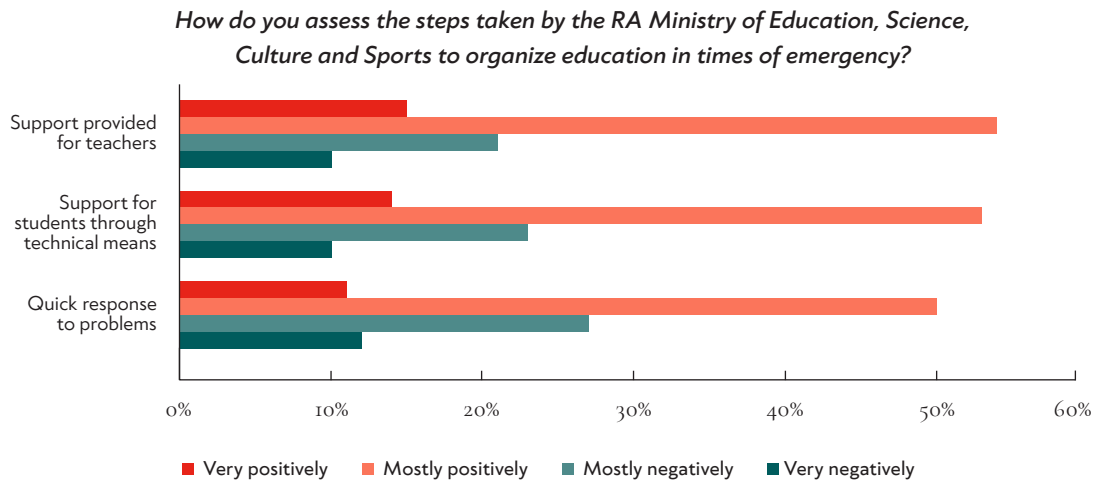
3. Teachers' and Students' Readiness for Remote Learning

As already mentioned, the main components of distance education are: institution-based nature, which distinguishes it from self-education; separated group of learners; interactive communication means; and the concept of connecting learners, resources and instructions. In Armenia, the large-scale implementation of distance education started in March 2020, when by the RA Government Decision N 298-Ն of 16 March 2020 an emergency situation was declared in Armenia, and educational institutions, including schools, switched to distance education.

The majority of teachers participating in the survey for the Report on the Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Education Policy in the Conditions of the Epidemic positively assessed the steps taken by the Ministry

of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of the Republic of Armenia towards the organisation of education during the emergency situation.

Figure 1. Effectiveness of Education Policy assessed by teachers (n = 722)



Source: Report on the Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Education Policy in the Conditions of the Epidemic (2021).

The main complaint and the negative assessment of teachers are related to the decision of 27 April 2020, according to which students’ marks for the second semester, as well as annual marks, were calculated based on the marks entered into electronic registers before 13 March 2020, while the vast majority of teachers performed students’ assessments during online lessons as well. In the opinion of the expert community, that decision resulted in a decrease of students’ attendance in online lessons. This topic was extensively debated in social media as well. According to the content analysis, that decision was considered inappropriate by students, teachers and parents, because it meant that all their efforts were useless and meaningless in terms of participation in remote lessons.

Implementation of distance education faced a wide range of challenges, including teachers’ computer skills, students’ participation in distance education and their satisfaction with it. During the pandemic, a significant range of training courses for teachers was provided by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of RA: around 2,000 teachers were trained. Nevertheless, 34% of teachers involved in the survey stated that they still need training in ICT (Figure 2). 63% of teachers participating in the survey attended training courses to improve their computer skills, while 37% did not participate in such activities³.

According to the teachers, the most desirable training topics to increase their qualification and the effectiveness of online lessons are ICT and computer skills training (34%), practical knowledge of online teaching tools and techniques (17%) and any other training that might be helpful (20%).

³ Report on the Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Education Policy in the Conditions of the Epidemic (2021).

Figure 2. Teacher's Readiness for online teaching (n = 722)



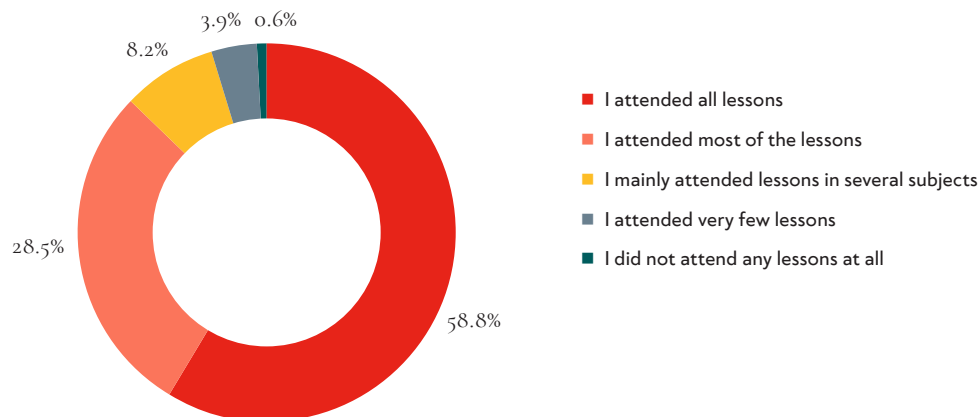
Source: Report on the Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Education Policy in the Conditions of the Epidemic (2021).

4. Students' participation in remote lessons

The other challenge of distance education is students' participation. The majority of students attended most remote lessons, and 58.8% participated in all lessons. Participation in remote lessons required youth quick adaptation to the conditions of the epidemic.

91% of students participating in the survey reported having internet access at home. The majority of students (about 95%) attended online classes via mobile phone, however, mobile phone tariffs with internet access were not affordable for all students.

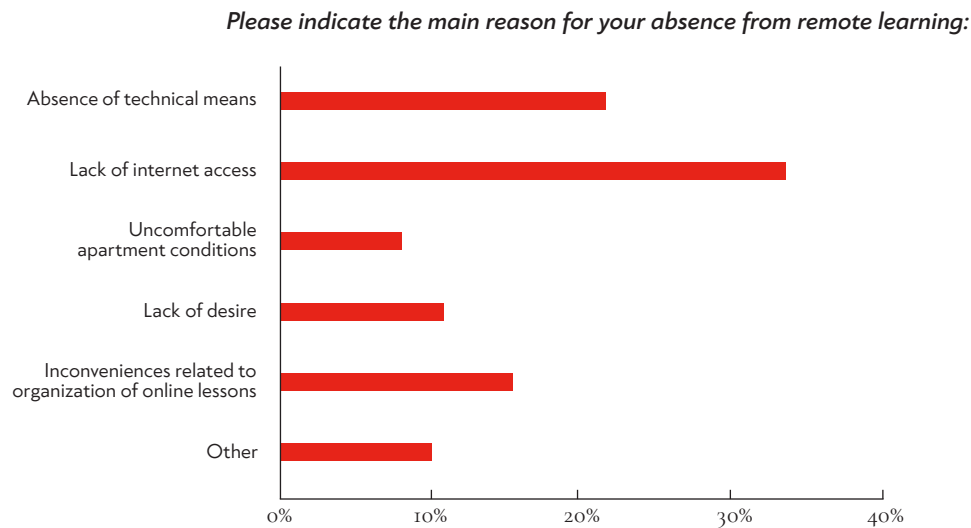
Figure 3. Frequency of students' participation in remote lessons (n = 792)



Source: Report on the Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Education Policy in the Conditions of the Epidemic (2021).

The lack of technical means affected students' participation in remote lessons. 33.8% of the students stated that their absence from remote classes was caused by the lack of internet access, and 21.7% mentioned the lack of technical means, even though the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport tried to solve this problem by providing families in need with technical means. As seen above, 91% of the children reported having internet access at home, but 33.8% do not own technical means to do so.

Figure 4. Reasons for students' absence from remote lessons (n = 792)



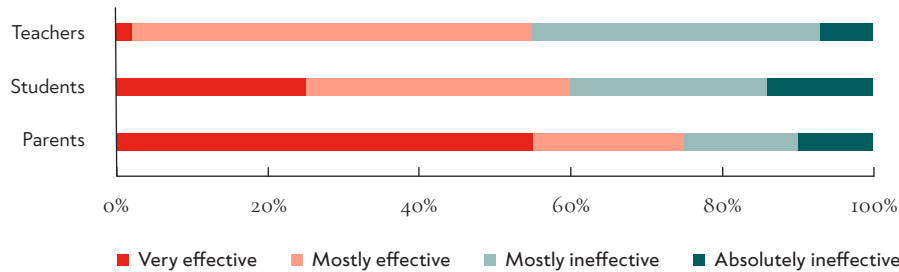
Source: Report on the Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Education Policy in the Conditions of the Epidemic (2021).

5. Effectiveness of Education Policy and Educational Services in the times of COVID-19

The opinions of teachers, students and parents who participated in the survey on the effectiveness of online education are very different. Some survey participants and experts think that online lessons were effective, while others believe they were ineffective. The details are presented in Figure 5. Parents rated the effectiveness of online lessons higher than students and teachers. It was rated the lowest by teachers due to the lack of necessary knowledge and experience. As it was presented above, ICT training is among the most demanded types of training activities. This lowest rating given by the teachers is also based on the fact that most of them tried to organize and conduct online lessons in traditional, “classroom” manner, which created difficulties for them and therefore affected their assessment of online lessons.

Figure 5. Effectiveness of online education (n of teachers = 722, n of students = 792, n of parents = 800)

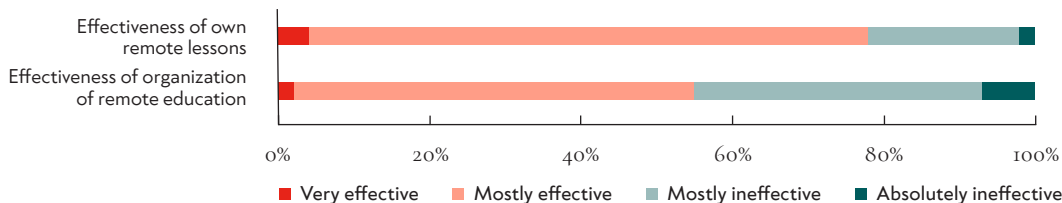
How effective do you consider the organization of online education in general in times of emergency?



Source: Report on the Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Education Policy in the Conditions of the Epidemic (2021).

It is interesting to compare the assessment of the effectiveness of the organised distance education in Armenia with the quality of their own school lessons expressed by the teachers. They consider their own lessons more effective than online education in general. Although this result seems to be contradictory, it is completely explainable. Teachers still find the online education system imperfect. At the same time, they appreciate their individual efforts and consider their training to be effective.

Figure 6. Effectiveness of remote lessons according to teachers (n = 722)

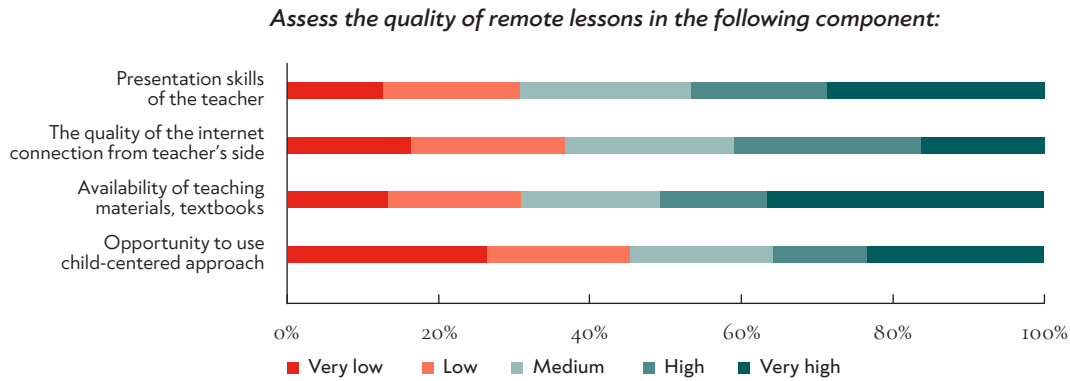


Source: Report on the Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Education Policy in the Conditions of the Epidemic (2021).

Taking into account this general declaration of teachers, it can be interesting to analyse the opinions of students participating in the study. The questions asked concerned the process of organisation and implementation of remote lessons by teachers. About half of the students (47%) assessed teachers' presentation skills highly or very highly.

The students rated the availability of teaching materials very highly (37%), whereas the opportunities of child-centred approach towards the students by the teachers during remote lessons was rated much lower. Additionally, the issue of internet connection from teachers' side was raised, as 36% of the students assessed the teachers' internet connection as low / very low.

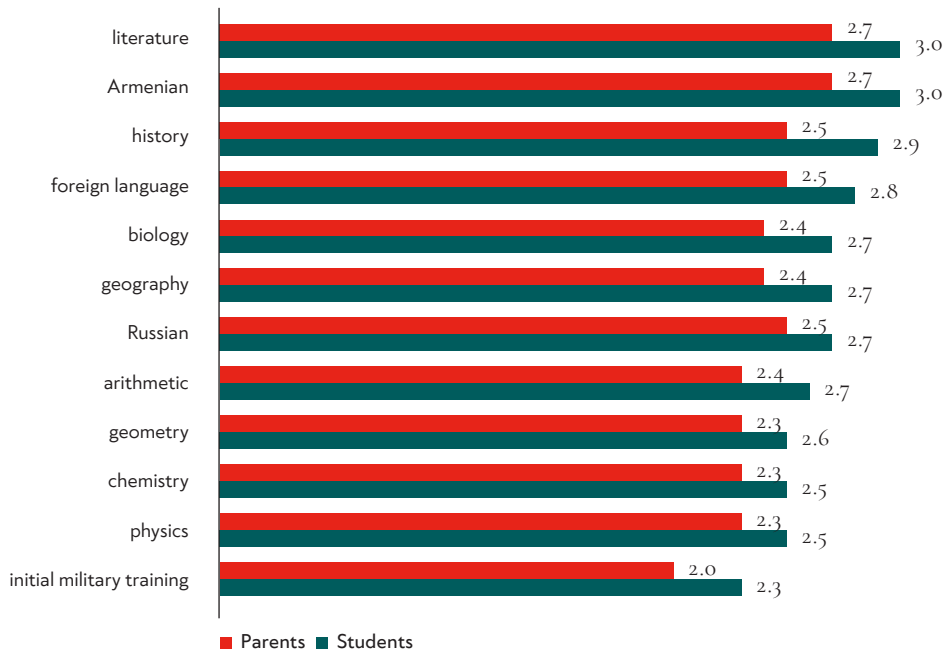
Figure 7. Assessment of the quality of remote lessons by students (n = 823)



Source: Report on the Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Education Policy in the Conditions of the Epidemic (2021).

Although parents assessed the general organisation of distance learning very positively (see Figure 5), students rated the effectiveness of online lessons higher compared to parents. Both parents and students considered teaching of arts and humanities subjects more effective than that of natural sciences.

Figure 8. Assessment of the effectiveness of remote lessons by subjects (n of students = 867, n of parents = 800, average values, scale 1–5)



Source: Report on the Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Education Policy in the Conditions of the Epidemic (2021).

6. Challenges of distance education during COVID-19

Challenges of distance education, which have been identified during the research conducted in Armenia, may generally apply to other countries as well. Particularly, the results of the analysed qualitative data reveal that studying online, which comes hand in hand with reduced social interaction, was a real challenge for students. They were lacking cultural knowledge, namely the insights typically arising from face-to-face teaching and social interactions. The effectiveness of education partly depends on that communication. Online education creates a barrier between the learner and the teacher.

Another important challenge of distance learning is the psychological effect of remote learning on students, parents and teachers. The psychological, educational and social problems of distance learning were mainly significant for primary school students (ISCED 1). This may also be attributed to a lack of understanding by students, parents and even teachers of the nature of teaching and learning activities carried out at home. Distance education has in some ways affected the social life of students and their parents. In particular, the necessary equipment is lacking, children's level of activity is low, and there is greater anxiety due to the lack of appropriate space for all members of the family. This is especially true for families with more than one student involved in distance education.

One of the identified challenges of distance learning is the level of students' participation in lessons. It is necessary to clearly separate the participation and the involvement of the students. Although the majority of students participated in remote lessons, only some of them were actively involved. Moreover, throughout the whole process of remote lessons, the involvement of the students decreased over time.

In addition to the above-mentioned issues, the following challenges of distance education were widely shared and discussed on social media platforms:

- Distance learning can cause many **psychological, educational and social problems**, especially for primary education students (ISCED 1).
- Schools and the education system were not ready for the organisation of online education in terms of both **methodological and didactic materials**. Most of the subject textbooks and didactic materials were available only on paper, not electronically, making it technically difficult to deliver them to the students.
- Remote education requires at least **elementary technical knowledge from the teacher**, while the majority of teachers do not have materials presentation, video communication and other necessary skills.
- Spending long hours in front of a computer or phone screen has caused serious **health problems** for children.
- Distance education assumes a **certain degree of independence of the students**, while primary education students in particular had difficulties to actively participate in the classes, and as a result, parents had to become heavily involved in online lessons.

Overall, the sudden changes prompted by the COVID-19 crisis suggest that some key issues will determine the quantity and the quality of online education in the future. On the students' side, connectivity and extracurricular issues, the level of students' motivation and their learning skills influence their virtual learning. On the institutional side, professors' expertise in online teaching pedagogy, the incentives structure introduced by education policies and the existing IT infrastructure will contribute to the successful functioning of online education in schools and educational institutions.

7. Main Findings

Before the pandemic, a lack of computer skills among the teachers and the students, and insufficient availability of technical means were reported, which had a negative impact on the efficiency of online lessons, even though the majority of teachers who participated in the research had attended training to improve their computer and distance education skills.

Most teachers were provided with internet access and technical means to organise online lessons, mainly using smartphones. However, the majority of teachers still need information and communication training, including learning to use electronic management tools.

Around 90% of the students participated in online lessons. The main reasons for not participating were the lack of internet access and unwillingness to participate. 95% of the students participated in online lessons using their phones, but the internet prices were not affordable for all of them. The lack of technical means also affected students' participation in online lessons. Additionally, it was observed that the students did not have enough skills to efficiently use innovative educational tools available on the online platform. Nevertheless, there were children who were able to participate in online lessons even though they were previously unable to come to school before: children with disabilities, children working in rural communities etc.

The following challenges of distance education during the pandemic have been revealed:

- testing of teachers' computer skills and methodological skills for online teaching;
- lack of monitoring and evaluation system of distance learning;
- uncontrolled and direct influence of the family on the learning process of students;
- lack of physical contact;
- testing of personal skills of children;
- violation of the principles of social justice, equality and participation in the education system;
- due to the transition to distance education, students have experienced some social-psychological issues, such as anxiety or worry.

The following positive effects of the pandemic on the education system were observed:

- integrating crisis management into education policy;
- development of infrastructure;
- preparation, development and dissemination of educational online resources;
- capacity building of teachers;
- development of cooperation between state-private sectors and donor community;
- bigger teachers-parents cooperation;
- stronger cooperation within teachers' community and development of support culture;
- ability to organise learning process more effectively and inclusively for disadvantaged children who were previously physically unable to come to school.

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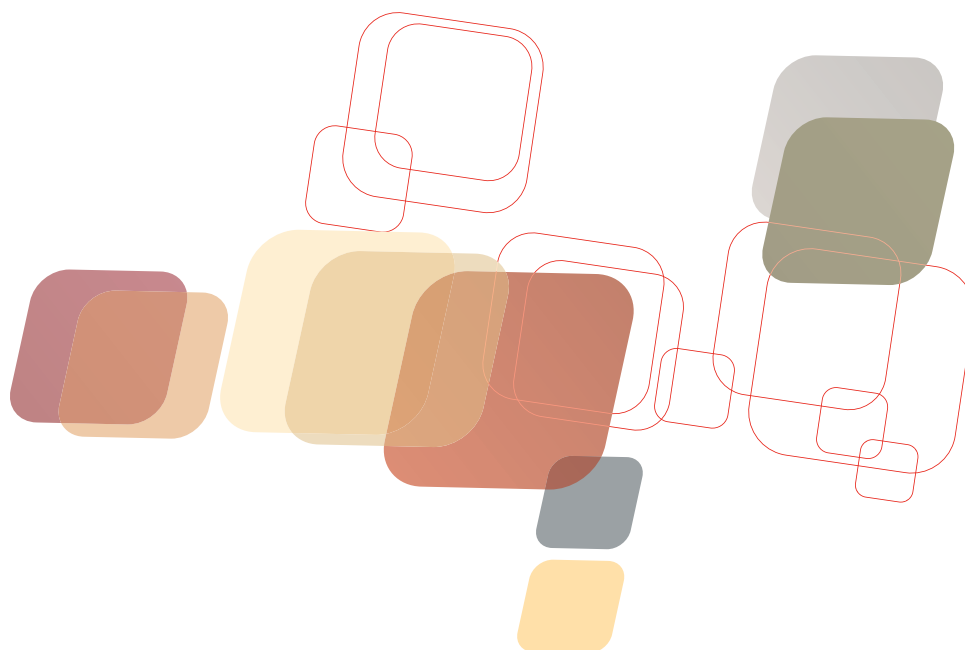
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Priorities for the new Erasmus+ programme in pandemic times: insights, challenges and strategies within the transition to the new programme 2021–2027

By Margarida Cardoso, Sofia Soeiro, Cláudia Teixeira Gomes

1. Introduction

The years 2020, 2021 and 2022 have been an intense pandemic period that will become unforgettable for several reasons, both for organisations and individuals, but also for strategic European programmes such as the Erasmus+. In the Portuguese context, the vaccination campaign was launched on 27 December 2020 and already included more than 89% of the population (from the age of 12) by 24 December 2021 (Mathieu et al., 2021, 2021a). Amidst the pandemic turmoil, the EU transition between two multi-annual funding frameworks has occurred: the 2014–2020 Erasmus+ programme has ended (projects to be completed up to 2023) and the new Erasmus+ 2021–2027 has started.

At a national level, the context influenced the whole PTNA¹ approach towards the launch of the programme, as well as the monitoring and closure of the previous Erasmus projects. The transition to the new programme, its priorities and characteristics, as well as the needed adaptations, were recognised internally, showing strategic alignment between work and priorities. The way work alignment and work engagement enable the perception of staff alignment with strategic priorities of the organisation (according to Biggs, Brough, Barbour, 2014) is connected with the perception of such priorities under an internal service perspective. The staff (internal customers) are requested to evaluate the different service dimensions and the overall effectiveness of the PTNA. Together with the internal customer perspective, Marshal et al. (1998) proposes to explore the external perceptions – in this case, it is accomplished through the beneficiaries' evaluation. Externally,

¹ This work refers to the Portuguese National Agency Erasmus+ Education and Training, its staff and beneficiaries. The Erasmus+ in Portugal is run by two Agencies, the Education and Training Agency which manages higher education, school education, vocational education and training, and adult education Erasmus+ actions (as well as new attributions related to internationalisation and higher education students' accommodation), and the Youth in Action Agency, which manages Erasmus+ youth and sports' sectors.

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KEYWORDS

Erasmus+ 2021–2027 priorities, COVID-19, telework, strategic alignment, working conditions, public service.

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the surveys emphasize interactions between the staff and the PTNA customers. Perceptions and interactions are influenced by the role of human resources' management, which follows progressive changes in society. In fact, society becomes more and more networked, with demographic and climate changes enabling individuals to combine their preferences in a matrix structure, with the acceleration of globalisation and the continuous development of digital technologies (Yoon, 2019). All these trends can induce the strengthening of relationships between service quality and the intention and abilities of the staff².

Improving the performance of public service is an important concern, and services such as the PTNA might involve “complex social issues related to globalization, migration, health crises, climate change”, as stated by Leisink et al. (2021, p. 1). In fact, that surely seems to be the case with Erasmus+, particularly during the pandemic. Public service performance transcends financial issues to include staff outcomes manifested in satisfaction, commitment and well-being, but beyond that, there is a relationship with public value creation. A much wider concept, public value includes the satisfaction dimensions surveyed among beneficiaries, but also those horizontal dimensions of the Erasmus+ programme which are crucial for our society. Public values can include what is appreciated by the public, but also what is good for the public (as referred by Andersen, Brewer, Leisink, 2021) – in fact, this is true not only for beneficiaries of the Erasmus+ programme.

Horizontal priorities for the new 2021–2027 programme, translating into major public values, have been anticipated by a specific approach of the PTNA – the NA Transition Plan – to address the programme change. The plan includes **an action approach** to objectives related to education and training internationalisation through mobility and cooperation among institutions; and **a horizontal approach**, consistent with the priorities and seeking a more inclusive overall practice related to Erasmus+, empowering and increasing synergies between different funding opportunities – including supporting the organisations' micro synergies³ – enabling the development of digital and greener practices within the Agency as well as supporting those practices in project development. These dimensions were targeted in the staff survey and the beneficiaries' survey⁴ as inputs to strategic alignment (Biggs, Brough, Barbour, 2014) and instruments to measure overall performance.

² Chuang, Liu, Cheng (2015) conclude that team orientation and internal customer satisfaction – two dimensions surveyed in several indicators of the staff survey – are “key factors influencing service quality” (2015, p. 6) and are “among the most essential factors that influence [...] effectiveness” (2015, p. 6).

³ Micro synergies at organisational level can be understood as those that already exist, linked with other funding forms, for different purposes or activities, around the same overall objective, such as training courses, research activity or others. For instance, a certain VET course can be funded by the ESF, but some participants might be granted through Erasmus+ to accomplish a traineeship in EU.

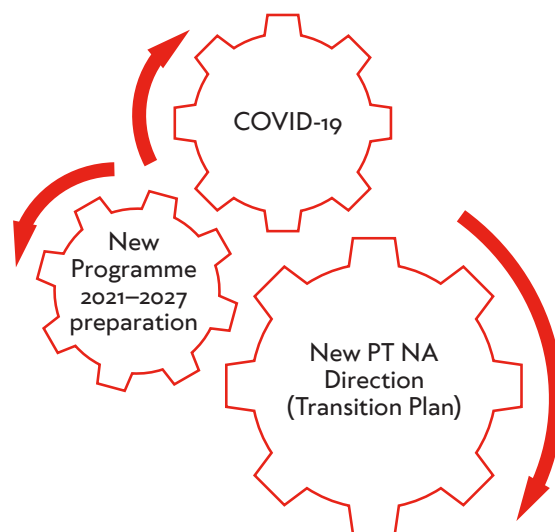
⁴ The surveys were both active in January 2021: the staff satisfaction survey between 11 January and 1 February, and the beneficiaries' satisfaction survey between 11 January and 27 January.

Altogether, the pandemic deployed a series of social effects and challenges, evident in the indicators, reflected both in staffs' overall work engagement and perceptions of strategic alignment, and beneficiaries' participation as an outcome of public service and signs of public value creation (Andersen, Brewer, Leisink, 2021). This included the overall service and some reflections on issues such as application support, selection, monitoring, the Agency and the programme brand. Other issues included organisational indicators showing impacts on staffs' work, or rather how the project lifecycle management was influenced. The beneficiary survey also included an anticipation on how the horizontal priorities were being prepared by the beneficiaries – considering these horizontal priorities to be public values transferred from Erasmus+ to the beneficiary organisations, projects and even groups. It should be noted that internal conditions for greener and more digital work were anticipated, since 2015, by a further-paperless-Agency⁵ (Sellen, Harper, 2002), based on mobile ITs and enabled an immediate transition to telework⁶ (Chaterjee, Sarker, Siponen, 2017) – or peopleless offices (staff working on digital platforms) and officeless people in digital workplaces (Byström, Ruthven, Heinström, 2017), as staff was temporarily prevented from accessing the office due to the pandemic.

Summing up, in practical terms, the transition between programmes involves the synchronisation of three important issues:

- the pandemic, hitting its highest severity by the time the surveys were distributed (January 2021);
- the preparation of the new programme, a new Programme Guide, adjustment of existent ruling;
- the Transition Plan of the PTNA, promoting the strategic alignment of the organisation.

Figure 1. Analysis framework



⁵ Paperlessness, or the paperless office as referred by Sellen and Harper (2002), is based on a comparison between paper use and information systems which try to improve the affordance that paper can ensure; although information systems are symbolically associated with novelty, they must prove effective and flexible; while paper use comes with many costs (including environmental costs), information systems involve training needs, risks of obsolescence and cybersecurity issues; finally, the somewhat circumscribed interactions enabled by paper can be contrasted with the multiple possibilities which are the real leverage of information systems, enabling telework.

⁶ Mobile ITs (or ICTs) enable five affordances to ease telework, according to Chaterjee, Sarker, Siponen (2017, p. 2): “mobility, connectedness, interoperability, identifiability, and personalization”.

It is worth noticing relevant strategies framing the Transition Plan, which intended to promote the mentioned alignment of institutional drivers and external environment (Van Loon, Vandenabeele, 2021). Such is the case with the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps Inclusion and Diversity Strategy, aimed at ensuring equity of access to diverse approaches towards groups with fewer opportunities as a way of “contributing to sustainable growth and ensuring equity, prosperity and social inclusion in Europe and beyond” (Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2021)⁷. The European Education Area 2025 is a key Erasmus driver, as well as the EU Green Deal, the Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027, all adding objectives of flexibility and simplification, increasing mixed mobility (blended or physical and virtual), virtual cooperation, newcomers’ participation, including grassroots organisations, and also increasing the international capacity across different sectors and institutions.

The PTNA Transition Plan was based on a set of strategic objectives selected from the above-mentioned documents and the Portuguese specific legislation, corresponding to the new Erasmus+ 2021–2027 programme regulations and actions. It also followed the critical relevance of the aforementioned E+ horizontal priorities. As so, the Transition Plan **action approach** was designed to target increase students’ mobility; strengthen and diversify mobility patterns and countries; encourage European networks (including Strategic Partnerships); and refine monitoring, communication and dissemination mechanisms to improve the projects’ quality. It translated into practical regulations attributing a set of responsibilities, including internationalisation strengthening, innovation and collaboration through mobility and institutional cooperation; while the **horizontal approach** included priorities, but also management, quality and dissemination of the programme, enabling structured responses and network activities to reinforce the programme impact.

2. The horizontal approach

Horizontal priorities mean, according to the EU terminology, issues which have “relevance across its principal policy domains” (Gore, Wells, 2009: 158), or public values as previously stated. To address purposes comprised in the referred strategies and drivers, as in the mentioned Transition Plan, efforts have been made by the PTNA, including drawing strategies oriented to:

- Equity and Inclusion (E&I), in line with EC approach, as the Agency has an Internal Working Group (since 2018) and an Inclusion Officer (since 2019), and promoted the development and implementation of the E&I Strategy; dissemination events, the E&I Award and information accessibility;
 - Synergies, establishing an Internal Working Group and a Synergies Officer (since 2018); as well as the participation in dissemination events on EC programmes and complementary funding, including working on “micro synergies” developed at an organisational level;
- Digital and Green, both internal and external, as the Agency developed an overall digitalisation of processes (CRM), enabling the preparedness to face teleworking needs (Chaterjee, Sarker, Siponen, 2017) and participation in online meetings (through MS Teams), including at a competence level; and the improvement on remote communication and support to beneficiaries, including a whole activity plan based on online programme dissemination and monitoring meetings.

These horizontal priorities were surveyed among the universe of 2014–2020 beneficiaries to better understand the situation in each organisation before the launch of the new Erasmus+ programme. Along with

⁷ Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2021, Part A: General information about the Erasmus+ Programme: bit.ly/3zg6yTI [access 31.01.2022].

knowing if organisations were already aligning their projects with the strategic dimensions of Erasmus+, other surveyed issues relevant the development of the Transition Plan, as well as the strategies mentioned above, were aimed at gaining insights from beneficiaries related to past and future participation in the Erasmus+ programme. The answers confirmed that beneficiaries were already quite aware that inclusion was a priority of the programme. Moreover, the survey also confirmed the presence of micro synergies, meaning that many organisations have developed projects (*latu sensu*) financed by other EU funding sources besides Erasmus+:

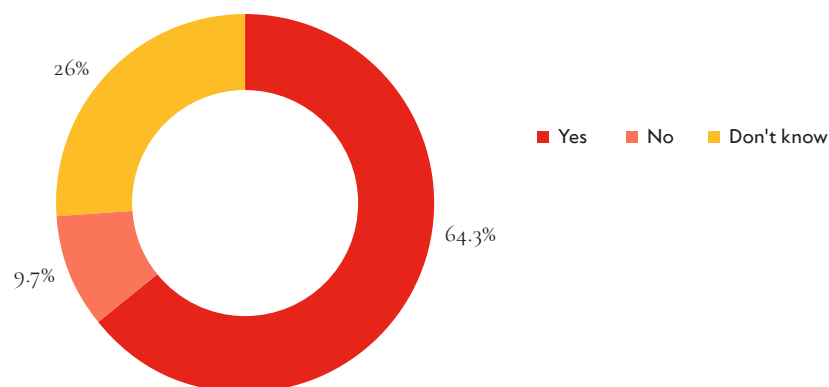
- An overall panorama of the beneficiaries' results shows that 42% of them do have an inclusion strategy or some sort of strategic inclusion plan of their own, following EU guidelines and regulations. Overall, circa 60% of the respondents were preparing the aforementioned Equity and Inclusion strategy.
- Regarding micro synergies, 63% of the PTNA beneficiaries were also beneficiaries of other funding or programmes, such as Horizon 2020, POCH, or POISE (two ESF-funded Operational Programmes), and as 73% of them are educational institutions, this probably explains why they are so proficient in getting complementary funding for the overall educational purposes.

It became clearer that information about horizontal priorities has long been assimilated by beneficiary organisations from different sectors, most probably because of the fact that these priorities are common to multiple policy strategies (Gore, Wells, 2009). But this knowledge and alignment may also have emerged as a result of direct contact with the NA staff (Biggs, Brough, Barbour, 2014), including dissemination and monitoring events, as well as through other contacts related to European funding (considering that the EU set these priorities as relevant for its policies sometime before the 2021 launch). In fact, priorities have long been debated – and not only in Portugal – even within Erasmus+. In particular, the digital approach and related matters have also been an issue for long, but have obviously become more important due to the pandemic, as a result of transitioning to digital workplaces (Byström, Ruthven, Heinström, 2017).

3. Intentions to apply and the 2021 call selection

When asked about their intentions to apply in 2021, 64% of the beneficiaries state that they did intend to apply, and 26% did not know yet.

Figure. 2. Participation in Erasmus+ programme in 2021 (n = 415)



Source: PTNA BENEf Survey.

But in fact, in the 2021 call, 87% of applications received by the PTNA in four sectors came from organisations which were already beneficiaries in 2014–2020 (applicants/coordinators only). These applications generated more than 18,000 potential participants.

Table. 1. PT Erasmus+ Education and Training – 2021 Awarded projects and participants (provisional numbers)

Awarded projects / Participants by field	Projects addressing climate objectives under KA2	Organisations KA1 and KA2 (applicants)	Newcomer organisations (applicants)	Participants in learning mobility activities under KA1	Participants in virtual learning activities under KA1 (excluding HE)	Participants with fewer opportunities taking part in activities under KA1 (excluding HE)
Erasmus+ E&T	25.68%	372	13%	18,314	9.6%	16.4%
Adult Education	33.3%	41	29%	209	15.3%	20.1%
Higher Education	7.1%	98	2%	13,617	N/D	N/D
School Education	30.4%	114	11%	2,004	14%	17.4%
Vocational Education and Training	27.3%	119	18%	2,484	5.6%	15.3%

Source: Erasmus+ Dashboard 2021–2027 (February 2022).

Figures show an apparently modest rate of newcomer organisations in the first year, but nevertheless, a significant portion of beneficiaries were already prepared to address the Erasmus evolution and the horizontal priorities accordingly. Confirming this, applied and selected projects show a clear alignment between the horizontal priorities and those whose constitute their main topics (Gore, Wells, 2009), submitted in the 2021 call.

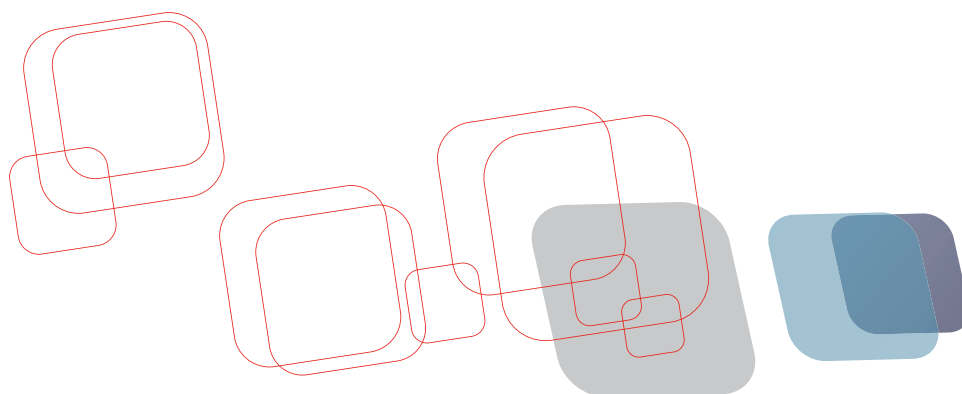
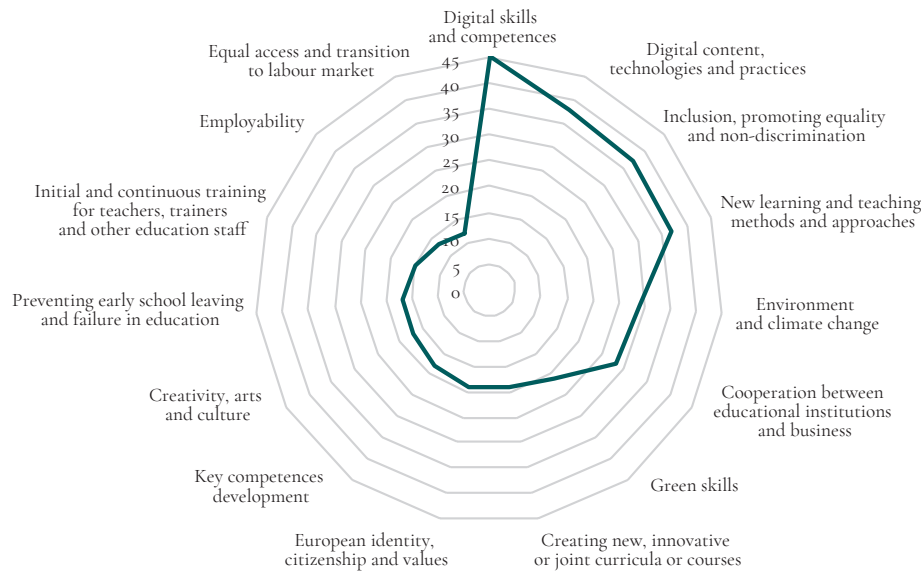
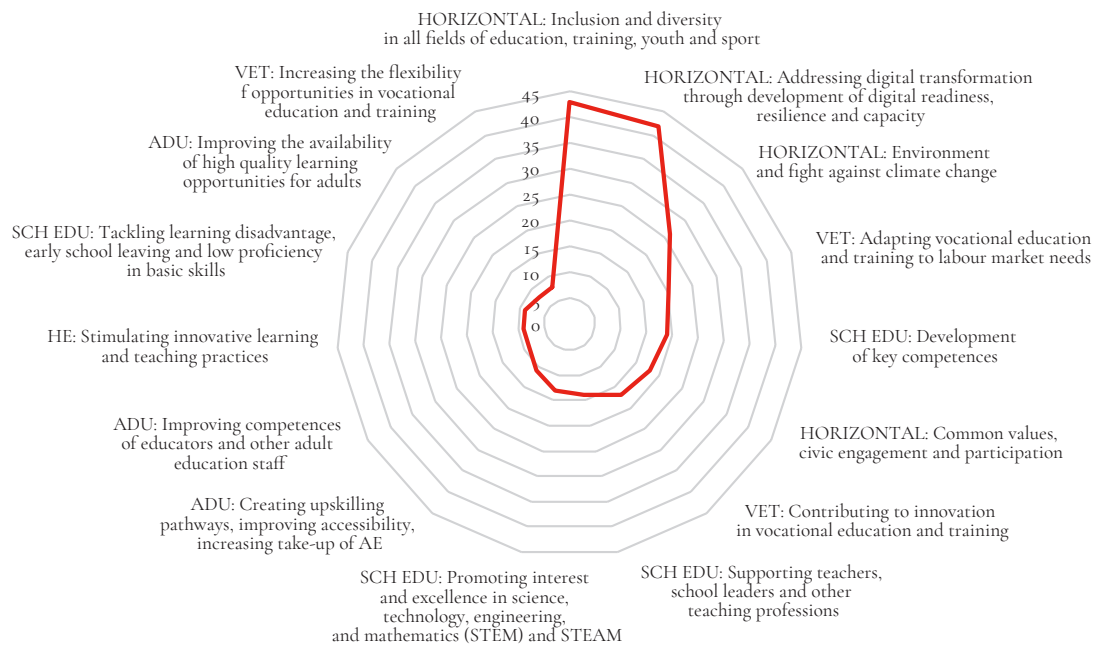


Figure 3. Awarded projects per topic (top 15, provisional numbers)



Source: Erasmus+ Dashboard 2021–2027 (February 2022).

Figure 4. Awarded projects per topic (top 15, provisional numbers)



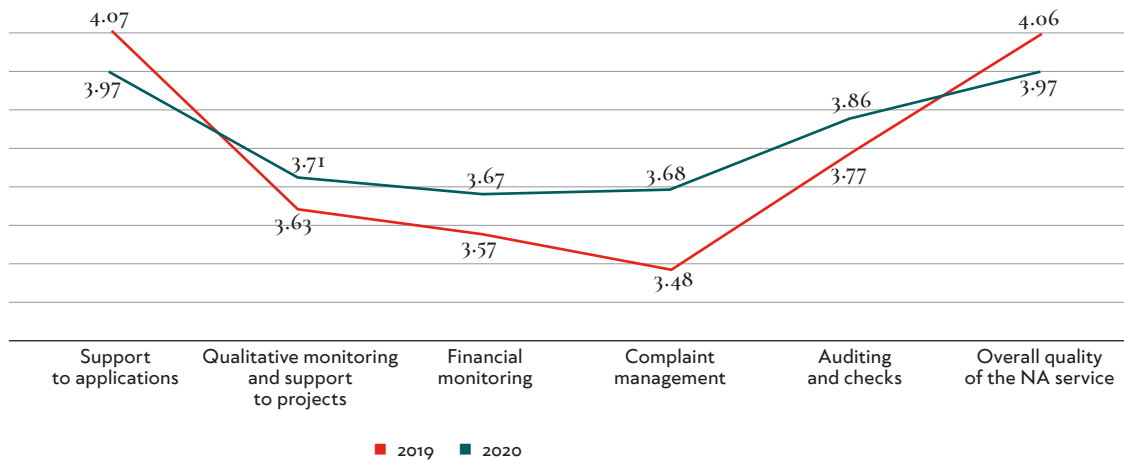
Source: Erasmus+ Dashboard 2021–2027 (February 2022).

4. The Erasmus+ action approach and the pandemic reflections

The PTNA staff survey is addressed to all Agency staff, and includes dimensions such as the project lifecycle management, application assessment process, image and results of the programme, the PTNA website, events (with separated indicators for onsite and online events), internal procedures, internal communication, human and financial resources management, IT, the PTNA facilities. It also includes teleworking conditions, requirements and results, and overall evaluation. Comparison between 2020 and 2019 surveys displays a response rate of 75.5% (40 validated answers out of 53) in 2019 and a response rate of 81.4% (48 validated answers out of 59) in 2020.

The PTNA staff survey shows that the overall programme and PTNA image seems not to have been harmed by the going-digital options related to telework⁸ (Chaterjee, Sarker, Siponen, 2017), which occurred extensively during the pandemic. When the project lifecycle management dimension indicators, concerning both key actions, are analysed and compared between the 2019 and the 2020 survey, it becomes apparent that the support to applications decreases slightly between the two years, as does the overall quality of the NA service appreciation and performance (Leisink et al., 2021); however, all other indicators show better results in 2020, including qualitative monitoring, financial monitoring, complaint management, and auditing and inspections. As for the overall strategic alignment (Biggs, Brough, Barbour, 2014), including programme image, Agency image, NA work programme activities (the activity plan), programme implementation and results, information on implementation and results, and the contribution to the strategic objectives of the Erasmus+ programme, all show a significant parallel to the previous survey.

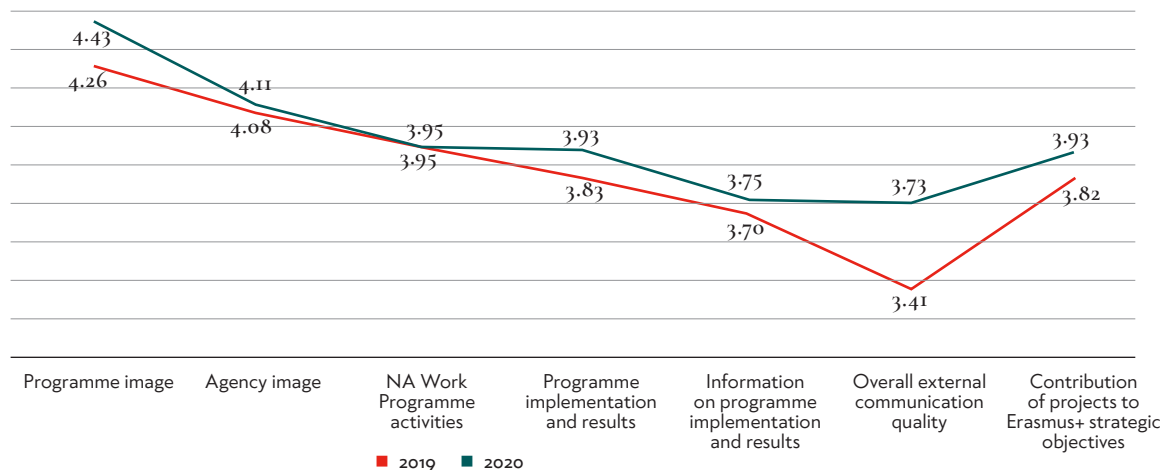
Figure. 5. Project lifecycle management



Source: PTNA STAFF Survey.

⁸ Telework was ruled in Portugal at least since 2009 (Public Administration), but it only got applied extensively after the pandemic started, in March 2020.

Figure 6. Image and results

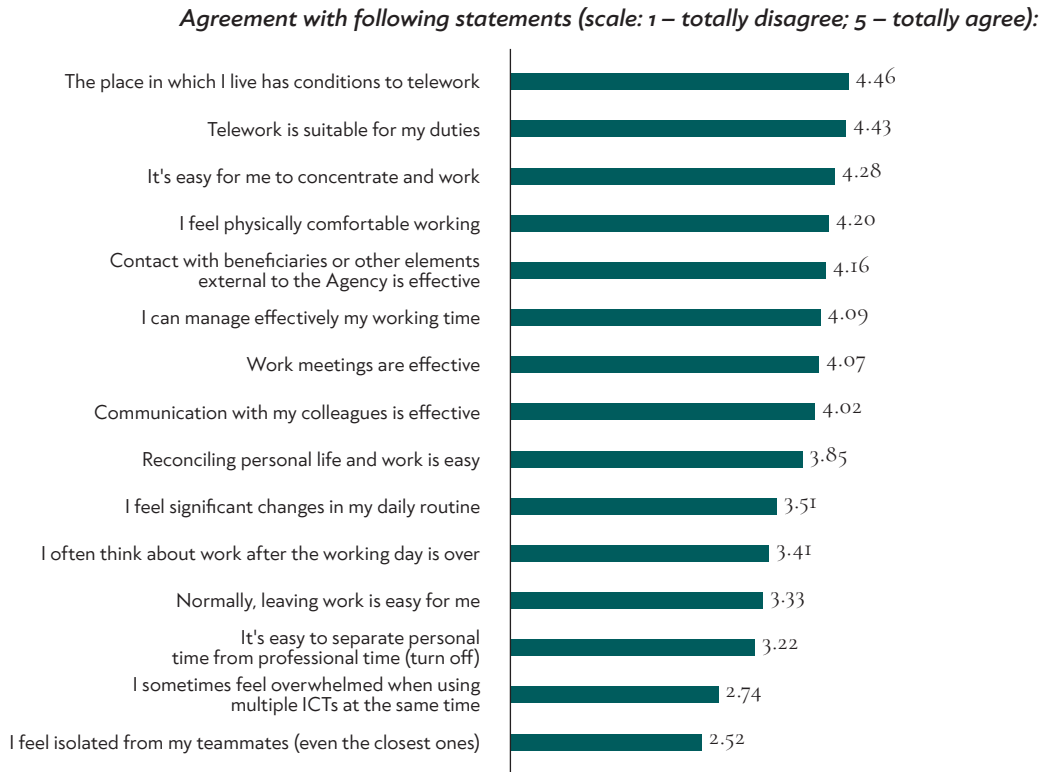


Source: PTNA STAFF Survey.

The overall context and environment conducting to this positive appreciation is likely to relate to the way telework was faced and evaluated by the Agency workers (Huvila, 2017). The main issues related to telework show not only that the Agency staff quickly adapted to it, as they stated to have the proper conditions for it, namely available IT infrastructure (Huvila, 2019) and information needs duly satisfied (Afzal, 2017). Telework was also considered suitable to the staff's tasks and duties (Huvila, 2019), including aspects such as people feeling comfortable and concentrated on their duties (Byström, Ruthven, Heinström, 2017), an effective contact with beneficiaries, among other issues. In a way, there was an overall outcome of trust resulting from indicators related to information access and related team performance. It seemingly translates to a correspondence between expectations regarding implemented and perceived human resources management practices (Jacobsen, Knies, 2021), potentially contributing to “positively influence internal and external customer satisfaction” (Chuang, Liu, Chen, 2015, p. 2).

When analysing the conditions and requirements needed for telework, including information infrastructure (Huvila, 2019), it is noticeable that most of the staff have the necessary conditions to enable effective teleworking, including what presumably might be considered as full internet access (Byström, Ruthven, Heinström, 2017). Indicators seem to show an underlying trust in full access to information needed to perform duties. Collaboration within and between teams is adequately enabled through IT (Huvila, 2017; Yoon, 2019). Most workers state that there was a significant increase in working time, probably related to information access and IT, as “giving the vast amount of information available at any given point, the pure processing of information may take more time than reasoning and reflections upon it” (Byström, Ruthven, Heinström, 2017: s. p.). Accordingly, there is a noticeable increase in electricity and food expenditure, which are issues that were amplified significantly with the introduction of telework, not only at the Agency, but also in general, something to which the Agency colleagues all over Europe might probably relate.

Figure 7. Conditions for telework (n = 47)



Source: PTNA STAFF Survey.

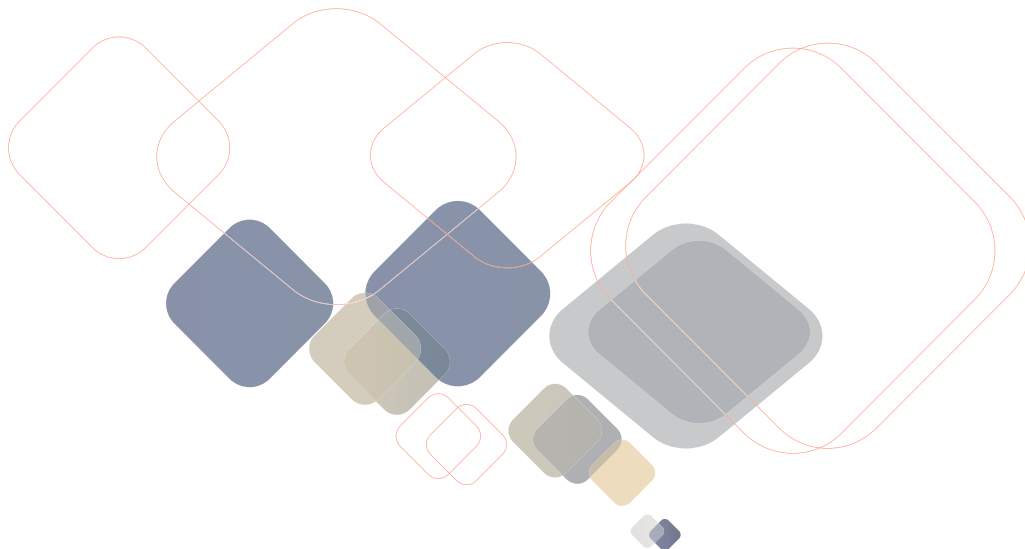
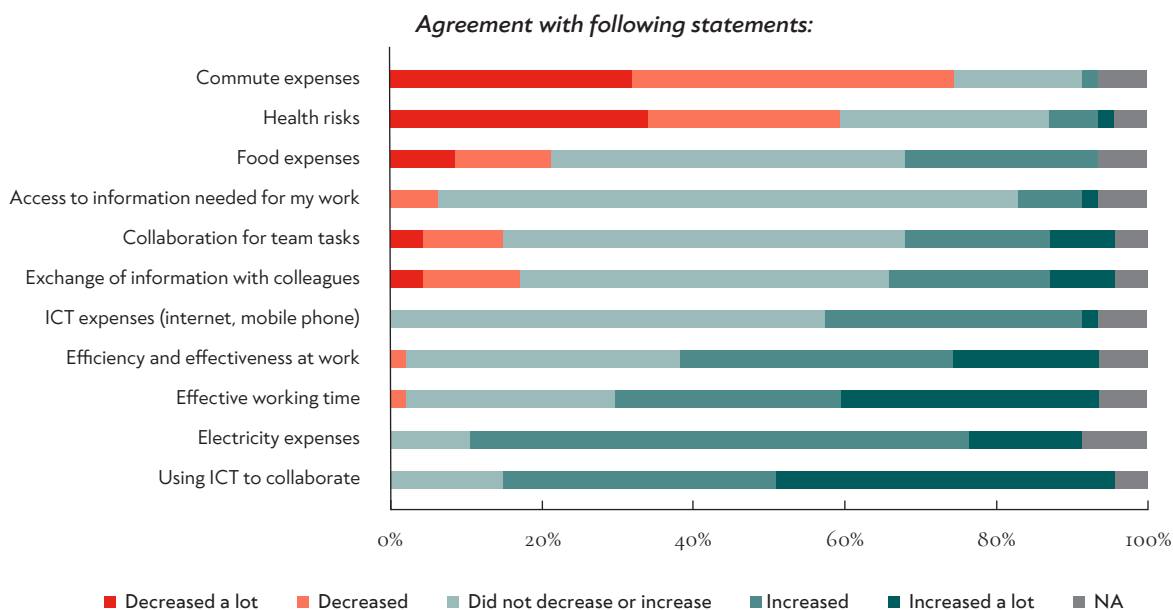


Figure 8. Telework: requirements and results (n = 47)

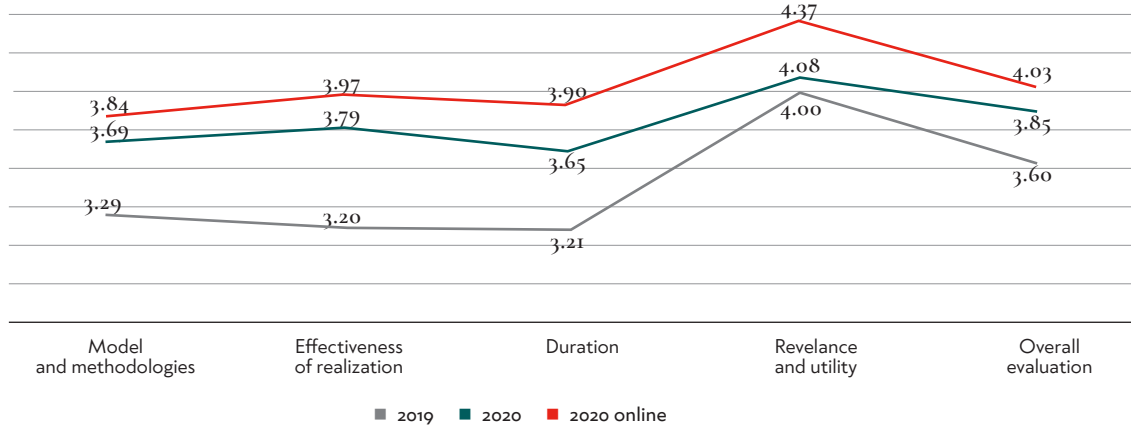


Source: PTNA STAFF Survey.

The two graphs below show that the staff clearly appreciated the way dissemination and promotion were made accessible to (much more) potential beneficiaries, as a way of “flattening”, meaning reducing distance between the PTNA and the public (Yoon, 2019). It also shows that transition from face-to-face to online dissemination events did not significantly change the beneficiaries’ (2014–2020) perception, as they maintained high appreciation rates on formats and methodologies, tools and technologies, duration, relevance and utility, and on the overall satisfaction with the events organised. Although quite simple, these two graphs are focused on very important communication issues for the Agency. It is visible that some changes that were made compulsory due to the pandemic, such as the need to organise online meetings with beneficiaries, as well as the possibility to reach them whenever they needed through this alternative, seem not to have affected this public service (Yoon, 2019), but in fact increased the audience size (as online services make it possible to address much more attendants), i.e. the number of potential applicants to which information on Erasmus+ was made accessible and available in order to apply⁹.

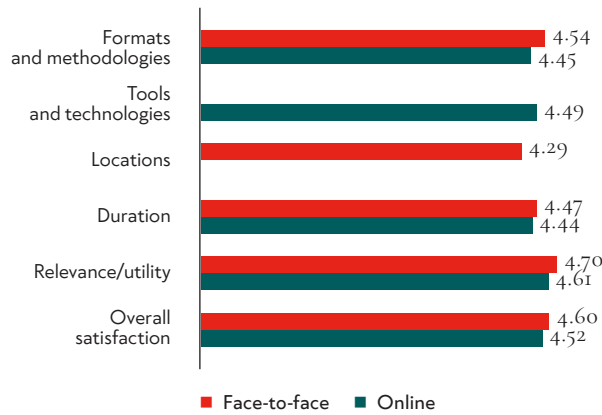
⁹ In 2019, the total number of participants in onsite meetings’ surveys (pre-pandemic) was circa 2100; in 2020, online meetings reached over 4000 survey participants.

Figure 9. Programme dissemination and promotion (n = 47, average rating, scale: 1–5)



Source: PTNA STAFF Survey.

Figure 10. Programme dissemination and promotion: face-to-face vs online events in 2020 (n = 415, average rating, scale: 1–5)



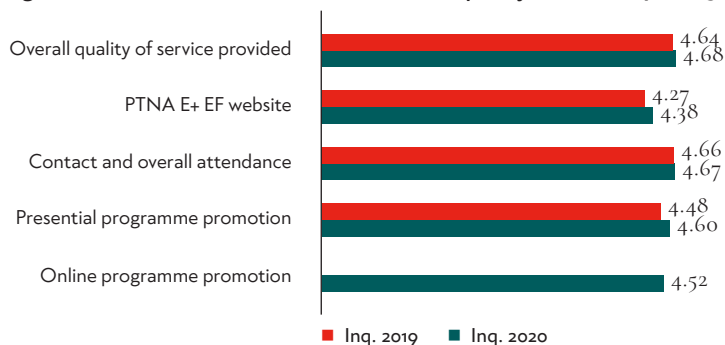
Source: PTNA BENEf Survey.

The beneficiaries’ survey dimensions include access and information available about the programme (Byström, Ruthven, Heinström, 2017); communication and overall quality of service (Leisink et al., 2021); application, selection, and project implementation; projects’ results, relevance, and overall assessment of participation, as well as the horizontal priorities, including inclusion and synergies; there were also some questions regarding the pandemic and its effects on projects and participation in 2020 and 2021, as well as a request for improvement suggestions. The survey universe included all Portuguese organisations with projects approved in the Erasmus+ programme 2014–2020, the response rate was 77% (415 valid answers). Answers were provided by project coordinators (73%), school heads (22%), teachers/trainers (20%). Organisation types included mostly schools and educational institutions (81%), as would be expected, but also NGOs (10%). Organisations were mostly situated in the Norte (37%), Lisboa (25%) and Centro (20%) regions, which in fact corresponds not only to the population distribution in the country, but also to the education system

distribution. Also as expected, most organisations' legal status was public (60%). As for the Erasmus sectors, organisations corresponded mainly to school education (56%) and VET (34%), according to each sector's weight in number of beneficiaries. Circa 89% of the respondent organisations had projects in progress in 2020, while 11% of the respondents had their projects already finalised.

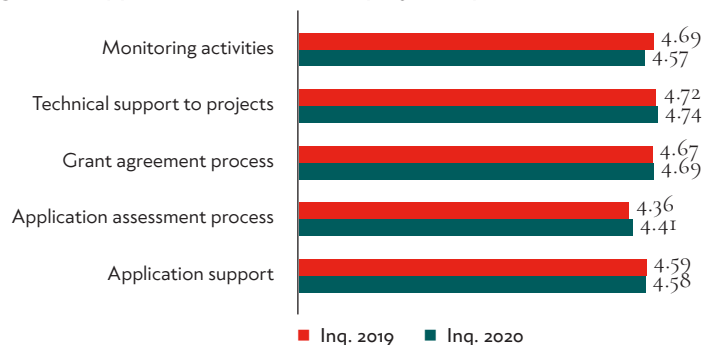
Linking some of the staff and beneficiaries' surveys results on the work done by PTNA during the 2020 pandemic year demonstrates that contacts, attendance and quality of service, as well as the application, selection and project implementation support were at quite similar levels to the previous year (2019).

Figure 11. Contacts, attendance and overall quality of service (n = 415, average rating, scale: 1–5)



Source: PTNA BENEf Survey.

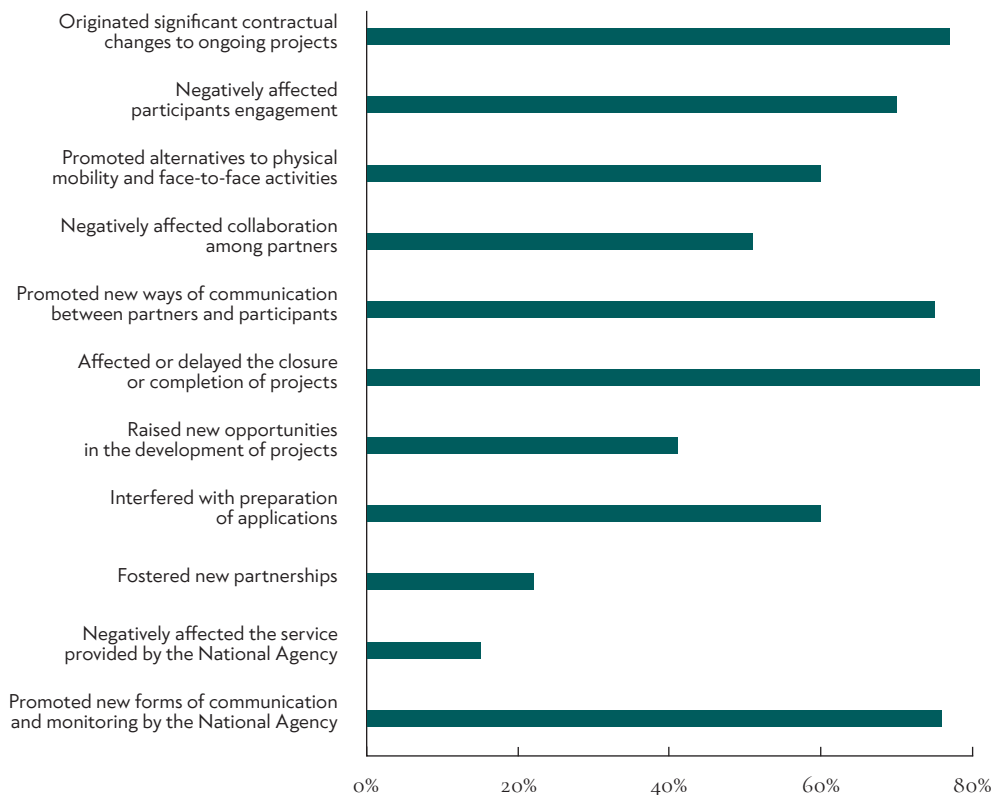
Figure 12. Application, selection and project implementation (n = 415, average rating, scale: 1–5)



Source: PTNA BENEf Survey.

The beneficiary survey question below, as well as questions related to telework in the staff survey, were introduced in 2020 to specifically address the effects of the pandemic in project management. As shown, the COVID-19 pandemic had significant negative effects (orange bars) on projects, but also enabled relevant changes (blue bars), including, for instance, fostering new partnerships.

Figure. 13. How the pandemic effected project work in 2020 (n = 415, "agree" and "totally agree answers")



Source: PTNA BENEf Survey.

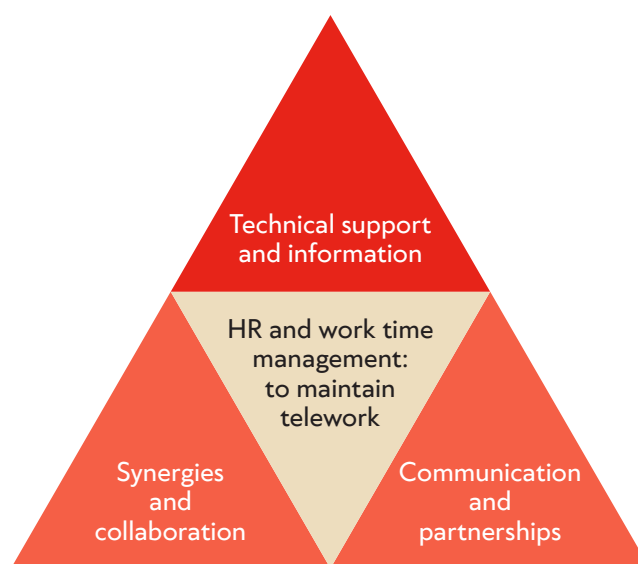
In fact, 22% of the Erasmus+ beneficiaries in Portugal established new partnerships, 41% found new opportunities for project development, 60% found alternatives to physical mobility or onsite activities, which became quite hard to accomplish, 75% established new channels and found new ways of communicating with partners and participants; and 76% found new ways of communicating with the Agency.

5. Programme implementation in transition times: insights and recommendations from internal and external perspectives

Both surveys create suggestions and recommendations for the future. Among the Agency staff, the most referred issues relate to human resources and work time management: most of the staff declared that telework would be desirable even if just twice a week, to balance personal and professional life, giving clues about the formation of a mobile workforce. Programme ruling and project management implied synergies and collaboration between technical teams, which was demanding but feasible even online (Huvila, 2017). There was, however, a need to increase external partnerships with several entities in order to comply with the beneficiaries and align with the new programme's demands (Biggs, Brough, Barbour, 2014), but these

demands required more technical support, easing contacts and information access and sources (Afzal, 2017). The Agency keeps a series of task forces and internal groups for specific purposes such as accreditation, assessment, targeted dissemination and the website. The need was felt to improve the website access and navigation, as well as it was considered advantageous to promote more webinars with beneficiaries. As for the EC IT, although an overall improvement of accessibility and usability was sensed, there was a need for a greater diversification of knowledge about tools available, as well as a demand for tools developed to support beneficiaries (Huvila, 2019).

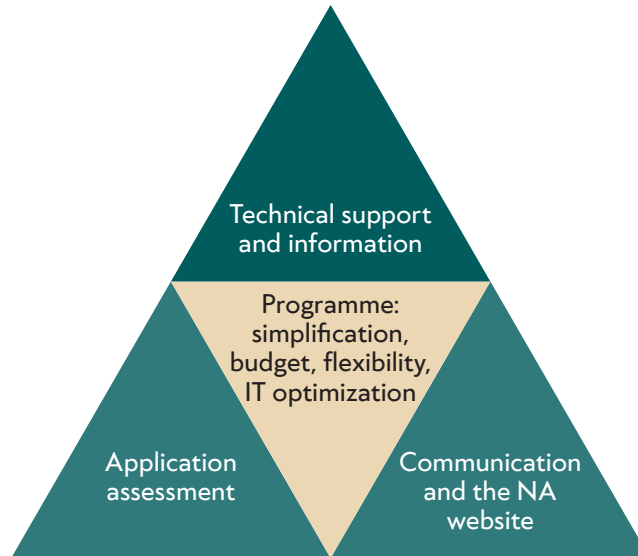
Figure. 14. Staff improvement suggestions



Source: PTNA STAFF Survey.

Among beneficiaries' evaluation of the performance of public service (Andrews et al., 2012; Andersen, Brewer, Leisink, 2021), the most frequently referred issues are mostly related to the administrative simplification of the programme (a long-standing request). Application forms are addressed, as there is a persistent demand for the forms to be clearer, more concise and less redundant. The programme ruling and project management is said to need more flexibility, including budget management. Technical support, contacts and information provided could imply a necessity of having more support documentation, showing in all cases an overall demand for more user-centred informational activity (Afzal, 2017), but acknowledging "credibility and trustworthiness of information" provided (Huvila, 2017). Following a demand for the reinforcement of certain actions' budget, it is expected that the programme addresses more and diversified needs of the target public and different sectors. The Agency overall communication and the website should strengthen general dissemination of information about the programme, including the improvement of the website organisation, navigation and information retrieval and updating. The European Commission IT tools could use an overall upgrade in access and usability, as well as the frequently requested all-in-one integration. Finally, the beneficiaries also demand explicit criteria for publishing application assessment, which, although public, seem to be in need for clarification.

Figure 15. Beneficiaries' improvement suggestions



Source: PTNA STAFF Survey.

New contexts shaped by the global public health crisis and frameworks of the transition moment between programmes reinforced, in some way, this user-centred activities and expectations of staff and beneficiaries. In fact, challenges to management can be derived from some of the improvement suggestions made by the staff, namely the assumption that collaboration and communication among NA staff is critical to their well-being at work. Also, the adjustment of the technical support and information regarding a new work design enabled an understanding of different perceptions of working time, and the survey results indicated that telework could be accepted as a work configuration by a substantial number of staff. Additionally, the beneficiaries' perspective of the role of the NA aligns more with long-time requests than with recent internal work of the organisation. In fact, from the point of view of beneficiaries, the improvement of the NA can be seen in terms of communication and dissemination based on the ICT tools used, as well as in the new developments established by the programme. The process of transition is dynamic and not finished, precisely because it requires an adjustment to the change. Therefore, in terms of management, this critical and continuous analysis of expectations meets, in fact, such organisational challenges that any transition poses.

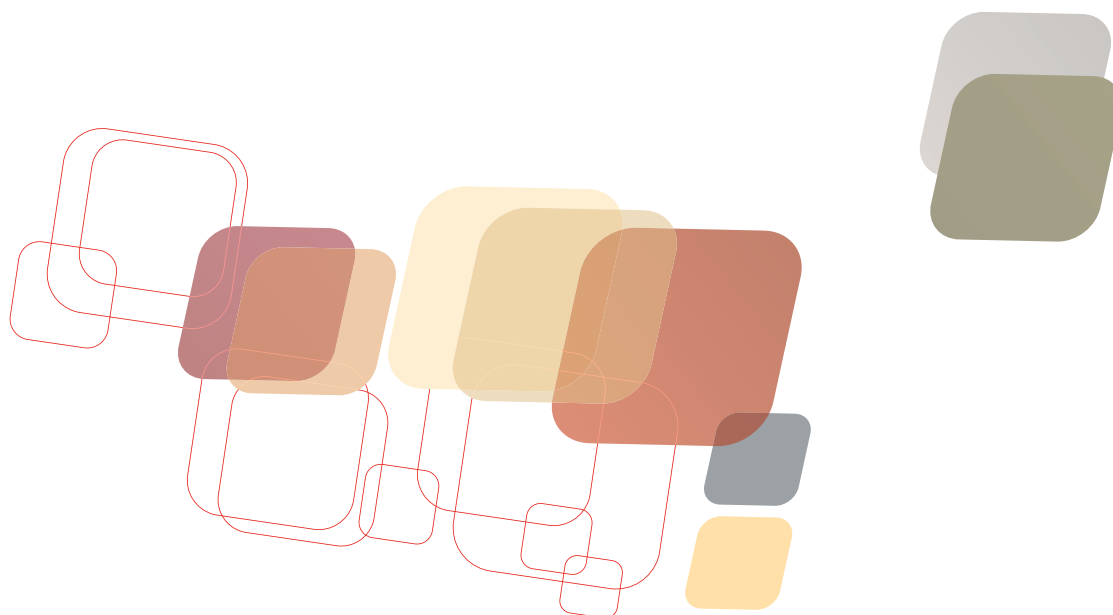
6. Conclusions

Main conclusions stress the fact that the pandemic had significant impacts on the PTNA dynamics, even during a transition phase between programmes, as in this case. Thus, the global context influenced the PTNA approach to the launch of the new Erasmus+ programme, as well as to the closure of the previous programme period. In addition to the EC horizontal priorities for the 2021–2027 framework period (inclusion, digital, green and participation), the internal Transition Plan reflected some critical endogenous adaptations, as well as their alignment with work and strategic priorities, to adequately address public service needs.

The effects of the pandemic have led to a new debate on telework and digital offices among both the staff and the beneficiaries. In fact, the digital approach and related matters have been an issue for long, but became more important due to the pandemic and as a result of transition to digital workplaces. One of the main considerations is that the efficiency and effectiveness, when analysing complexity at workplaces, was produced by different kind of structural changing processes. This approach, interconnected with key decisions related to the redesign of structures and processes, shows the advantage of the role of the staff and ICT tools in new working configurations. What happened in the case of the NA, namely that the staff felt comfortable with teleworking and there was a generalised perception of security in the performance of functions and tasks (including teamwork), was enabled by an effective ICT structure.

From the beneficiaries' point of view, going digital proved to be demanding, especially in terms of mobility and implementation of project activities; but it also disclosed a great adaptation capability of both organisations and individuals, as well as the promotion of alternative means of communication, ways of working and new ideas and opportunities for new projects. Programme management and project implementation adjustments, both from the PTNA and beneficiaries' perspectives, quantified by cancellations and postponements for instance, were the visible side and the immediate effect of the pandemic. But the transfer of global work systems to online setting, precipitated by the COVID-19, seems to have caused deeper and structural changes yet to be analysed. Data from PTNA staff and beneficiaries' surveys in some ways suggest that such adaptation occurred, namely within the scope of international cooperation and project management, centred on digital competences.

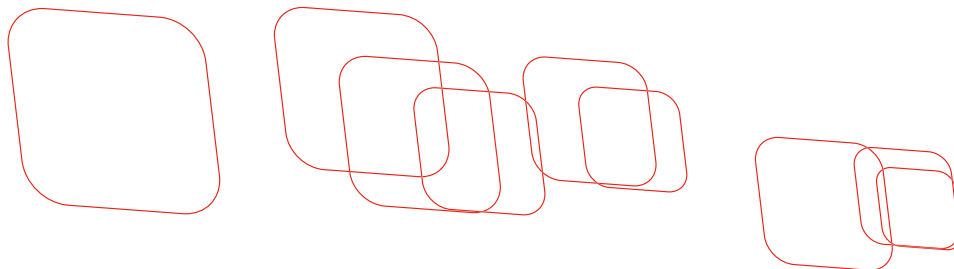
At the intersection of views between the staff and its clients, the proximity between the PTNA and the beneficiaries seems to have been maintained by improving the online access to information, and even contributed to a wider audience, as attendance at online meetings was significantly higher than at face-to-face meetings. From an institutional perspective, this seems to have allowed a greater assimilation and alignment with the horizontal priorities defined for the new funding period, notably public values, making it possible to consolidate the Agency's role in terms of supporting internationalisation in line with the strategic approach of the Transition Plan.



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