



Erasmus+

Barcelona
December 2014

Senior European Project Manager
European Commission Evaluation Expert
Danish National Agency Evaluation Expert
Jan Gejel
jan.gejel@skolekom.dk
Follow in LinkedIn



To
The European Commission's Directorate General Education &
Culture

Open evaluation of the first round of Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership Call 2014 - identifying critical points

This contribution to the evaluation of the first round of the Strategic Partnership Call and assessment process briefly reviews and summarizes critical elements discussed in European networks of professionals engaged in and advocating European cooperation. I invite the DG EAC to take the evaluation into consideration when evaluating the first year of Erasmus+.

The paper is produced and circulated in the spirit of helping counter the devaluation of European collaboration involving all sorts of people and institutions, thus defending the "European Project" against disinterest, mistrust and discouragement.

This contribution has not been invited by the DG EAC or any other European agency.

EVALUATION BASE

This evaluation is based on 15 years in European collaboration at all levels, on considerable direct involvement in application production and assessment in the first Erasmus+ round, on partner reporting from several countries and on countless comments and posts from European professionals across various professional networks.

The evaluation therefore represents a considerable voice from European professionals, and very many European professionals will agree with the critical content in the evaluation.

THE AIM OF THE EVALUATION

The aim of the evaluation is to briefly point out some critical and in some cases very problematic elements in the Erasmus+ first round Strategic Partnerships process, and to contribute to a highly needed review of key structures of Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships.

The evaluation is not in any way addressing the natural delays always occurring when basic program structures are changed.

THE FORM OF THE EVALUATION

To make the evaluation user-friendly it is organized in small precise comments, summarizing a certain field of events and facts, and avoiding too detailed descriptions.

The idea is to help the DG EAC to identify and pay attention to certain important and critical occurrences and experiences, and invite the DG EAC to request further details if relevant.

GENERAL CRITIQUE

The transformation from medium-sized European partnerships in the Lifelong Learning Program to strategic partnerships in Erasmus+ has produced the following practical experience from the first 2014 Call round:

- › The management and assessment of strategic partnership applications by the National Agencies vary tremendously across Europe, resulting in considerable confusion and dissatisfaction among applicants and partners
- › Some National Agencies are not able to manage those challenges at all, resulting in chaotic conditions for granted projects, problematic rejection of others and creating increasing distrust in European collaboration
- › Some evaluator corps in some National Agencies do not have the capacity to follow European Commission policy or follow key innovations in Erasmus+
- › The handing over strategic partnerships to the National Agencies is experienced by many professionals as a devaluation of European collaborative communities, as a new version of “learning partnerships”, and leaving a big vacuum between such projects and the higher level Alliances, beyond reach for most institutions
- › It is evident that some National Agencies simply do not have the capacity and competences to manage strategic partnerships, going far beyond what is needed to manage mobility; this represents a major threat to the quality and outcomes of strategic partnerships and to basic assessment ethics
- › The decentralized management represents a “nationalistic” approach not working well with the idea of collaborative partnerships, including an overestimation of the role of the coordinator in such partnerships and inviting increased use of national languages not supporting collaborative processes - however, the country of the coordinator is not important; the important thing is the partnership and the mission
- › The decentralized management does not ensure that the best projects are granted; it simply ensures that coordination is distributed across Europe according to certain parameters, basically irrelevant to the project and to European innovation
- › Therefore this part of Erasmus+ is experienced as a step back by many European professionals, due to National Agency management, lack of capacity among evaluators to follow the most important Commission and Erasmus+ innovation and due to the new budget structure producing considerable bias and inflexibility in the budgeting and therefore consequently negatively influencing the implementability of the projects
- › In general the application form and its discourse seems based on a rather traditional educational approach and thinking (box-thinking), and is not reflecting the key innovations promoted in the 2020 strategies by the European Commission, such as entrepreneurship, cross-sector partnerships and working with the community; such innovations call for more flexible program and application frameworks than traditional educational funding programming can offer
- › Erasmus+ is still primarily based on the logic of “educational sectors”, and even though applicants are allowed to state that their project addresses more than one sector, the logic of the entire application is still sector-based, as is the mentality of very many evaluators across Europe; this does not support 21st century learning, as promoted by the European Commission, such as entrepreneurship, cross-sector partnerships and working with the community; the form and structure of an application is not “neutral” as to the content that it can include

- › One of the most serious threats to European collaboration in Europe2020 is that it is now evident (from the first Erasmus+ round) that a considerable number of evaluators from across Europe, but specifically from certain countries, do not have the capacity or mentality to follow, support and implement the European Commission's educational innovation; if combined with an application form also fostering traditional educational thinking, this cocktail is a great threat to European educational innovation and directly contradicts the highly innovative discourse of parts of Erasmus+
- › This step back is regrettable, as these types of European projects are precisely the ones working with all sorts of people from across Europe; this step back is not what Europe needs in times of increasing distrust in the "European Project", and the chaos created by some National Agencies will no doubt discourage many institutions from further European interest

SPECIFIC CRITIQUE

In this section I will point to specific elements in Erasmus+ strategic partnerships and their management that the DG EAC might wish to pay attention to when evaluating the first round.

- › Some National Agencies managed to delay the project start by almost 6 months, however still insisting that the projects started on the 1st of September 2014
- › Some National Agencies directly invite coordinators to submit in own language, making it impossible for partners to participate and to sign contracts
- › National Agencies are interpreting and practicing basic project rules in very different ways; some Agencies even instruct the "independent" evaluators to delete Specific Costs, Partner Meetings or Intellectual Output, and the most creative Agencies instruct coordinators about how to spend the travel budgets in their projects
- › Budget and reporting rules are not transparent and not made available to coordinators and partners, and this has created all sorts of rumors and wild guesses among European institutions
- › The idea of projects requested to spend a large proportion of the budgets in connection with interim reports is extremely damaging, as a big part of the project is linked to the production of outcomes, typically taking place in the project's last phases
- › The Management and Implementation lump sum makes it very difficult to create budget efficiency, as 6000 euro can buy 3 times as many work days in Bulgaria than in Sweden, and as not all partners necessarily are involved in the project implementation at the same level
- › Intellectual Output is defined extremely differently across National Agencies
- › The travel budgets are not allowing budget efficiency, as traveling is no longer a matter of distance, but access to low-fare flights; this means that the project is not able to distribute travel funds according to needs, and it might result in some partners not being able to travel in the second project year
- › Exceptional costs are interpreted extremely differently across National Agencies: some Agencies accept Exceptional Costs, such as for example subcontracting, while other Agencies simply do not accept costs placed in this category

- › Training Events are based on very traditional “training course” approaches and do not allow flexible community meetings of other participants than project managers, for example in parallel to partner meetings, which does not support the new entrepreneurial, cross-sector and community based learning approaches
- › It is not suitable neither professional for National Agencies to insist on projects working for many months (in fact almost ½ a year) without clear financial guidelines, without a contract and without any pre-payment at all; such behaviour creates distrust in European collaboration
- › It is not suitable for National Agencies to refuse to re-schedule project implementations that have been delayed for up to 6 months due to lack of capacity in the National Agency
- › The idea of performing most of the application process and management process in national languages damage the collaborative and European spirit of the partnerships and the missions and contradicts the full and active involvement of partners from all member states
- › Some Agencies are creating their own versions of the rules and meanings of strategic partnership applications and the management of approved projects, and it seems as no European body is able to intervene and prevent such creative practice; some Agencies are even instructing the so-called “independent” evaluators to perform certain forms of evaluations, which is neither ethical nor legal

CASE

As the intention of this contribution is not to criticize and name specific agencies, evaluators or discuss specific applications, the following case is kept neutral as to specific information.

A strategic partnership application is granted with almost *maximum score*. The National Agency, not the evaluators, decides to cut the rather normal project budget by almost 100.000 euro - deleting all exceptional costs, some partner meetings and most of the intellectual outputs. The justification of this dramatic cut is sloppy and no further negations are possible. The coordinator is instructed to implement the full project, but with 100.00 euro less.

The coordinator of the project is instructed to start the project on the 1st of September, even though contracting and pre-payment will not take place until 4-5 months later. The partners must pre-finance the first 5-6 months' work including traveling, and without any guarantee of reimbursement.

The coordinator needed to go through complicated dialogues with the partners due to the castration of the project budget. When finally receiving the contract from the Agency, it is not correct and a new process of correcting the legal contract takes place. At a meeting for coordinators at the National Agency, much incorrect information is delivered, further confusing and discouraging the coordinator, such as: in this Agency we do not wish to use Exceptional Costs and you can only travel one person to the kick-off meeting!

The entire process put into the open the total lack of capacity and competences in the National Agency to manage other than small mobility applications.

The coordinator tried to plan a kick-off meeting early February - 6 months after the official project start (!), but will still have to await the outcomes of the contracting and the not easy to obtain consensus from all partners.

The project is very innovative and strong and is likely to contribute considerably to European innovation in education. However, the project now needs to accomplish its high ambitions in less than 18 months and with 100.000 euro less. Most professionals would say: mission impossible.

The coordinator is, even though representing a strong higher education, new to European collaboration and will most likely not wish to engage in European collaboration again.

The problem is that this case is typical for a certain kind of National Agencies, and despite several complaints have been submitted to the DG EAC, nothing happened, nothing was corrected, trust was not restored.

It can be foreseen that this chaos will continue along the project implementation.

The coordinator is now facing rumors that a first reporting must take place in April 2015, a few months after the project has started in reality, and that 70% of the first 60% pre-payment must have been spent at this point!

Whether those rumors are correct or not, they tell a story about the European nightmare experienced by an institution wishing to start working with Europe.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusion is inevitable:

The Strategic Partnership format represents, as foreseen by many professionals, a *devaluation of European collaborative communities* for the following reasons:

1.

The decentralized management of the applications and projects are creating distrust in European collaboration due to a) weak consensus among National Agencies and b) lack of capacity and competences in certain National Agencies, or more directly: incompetence

2.

Certain National Agencies and evaluator corps are not able to follow, support and implement the educational innovation of Europe2020 as promoted by the European Commission and Erasmus+

3.

In many member states the decentralized management is creating chaotic, unstable and discouraging conditions for the implementation of valuable European projects, adding to the increasing distrust in the "European Project"

There are no substantial justifications of devaluating European collaborative communities, on the contrary, and the devaluation is not line with the Commission's value for money approach, as large sums of money will now be wasted along the funding of "halfway implementable projects".

Therefore the DG EAC is invited to consider the following actions:

- > to restore confidence in European cooperation
- > to install application mechanisms reflecting 21st century learning and reflecting the Commission's innovative educational policy linked to Europe2020
- > to counter the devaluation of European collaborative communities
- > to counter the inflation of innovative Commission policy when operationalized into funding programs
- > to ensure centralized quality assurance of a European evaluator corps with the capacity to understand and value Commission innovation, including emancipating Erasmus+ and educational innovation from outdated academic mind-sets
- > to ensure sufficient consensus among key European players as to the management of European collaborative programs and projects

- › to counter the increasing “gamification” among European organisations of which National Agency to submit to and why, including organisations re-focusing from the project’s contribution to innovation to tactical gameplay

It seems that only two options are available:

A.

To return to a centralized application and management procedure of European cooperation projects, including strategic partnerships, before it is too late

B.

To insert strong control and quality assurance measures towards the National Agencies, including updated quality criteria for the selection of evaluators

The problem is that even though some Agencies seem to work well with Erasmus+, based on considerable skills and capacity, the mentality and the competences across European National Agencies are so different that it does not seem possible to correct this within a reasonable time span.

Furthermore, the intention to simplify European collaborative project applications has failed.

The simplification has been inserted at the wrong place.

When trying to implement the innovative and extremely positive elements in the European Commission and Erasmus+ educational policy, an increasing diversity of projects can be foreseen (entrepreneurship, cross-sector partnerships and working with community) which calls for - not one size fits all application forms - but flexible application structures that can be formed and designed to make the projects efficient and deliver value for money, and at the same time allow for a diversity of project types, formats and missions.

Programmers and professionals in European institutions still believe that the application form and structure is independent of the project content and mission.

This is a paramount mistake: form, structure and content are never independent of each other, on the contrary.

In simple language: some application forms foster and invite certain types of projects, while other application forms foster and invite other types of projects. When educational policy changes dramatically (such as in Europe2020), the application forms will have to follow and reflect those changes.

The academics should consult old Hegel, Marx and other clever people to learn about basic dialectics.

Projects do not need one size fits all application forms, but *simplified documentation* requirements along the project, including progression and final reporting.

The DG EAC is responsible for the whereabouts of the National Agencies.

I strongly encourage the DG EAC to conduct an open evaluation of the first Erasmus+ strategic partnership round, including openly debating lessons learned and how to counter further devaluation of European collaborative communities and the “European Project”.

It is discouraging that professionals across Europe already talk about renaming Erasmus Plus into Erasmus minus!

Barcelona, December 2014
Jan Gejel

