

# MINUTES OF MEETING: IGLO Higher Education working group – Next Erasmus+ programme (The Council)

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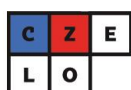
On 27 May the CZELO office participated in the meeting of the IGLO Higher Education working group. The topic of this meeting was the next Erasmus+ programme, and a representative of a Member State (Council position) presented the current state of play of the negotiations.

## State of Play at the Council

- Compared to last year, the current proposal is significantly different in terms of governance.
- One of the main issues is the Programme Committee. In the Commission's original proposal, the Programme Committee was not included. The Commission seemed to favour more centralised management. This would have reduced Member States' influence over the implementation of the programme. Member States wanted to preserve the Programme Committee, under the Danish Presidency it was reintroduced into the text.
- One of the questions is whether Erasmus+ should continue more or less as before, or whether the Commission should have more flexibility and room for manoeuvre? The text of the proposal has been simplified and is now more open. The less the legal text specifies, the more space there is for new political initiatives later. When new ideas emerge, such as the New European Bauhaus or youth-related initiatives, it is difficult to find money for them if the programme is too rigid.
- Member States want the Commission to present new initiatives in advance, so that there can be proper discussion in the Programme Committee. If there are several annual work programmes, they would have to run in parallel, which would create more pressure on the Commission to be ready on time. It could also make the Commission uncomfortable, because new political ideas might have to wait a year before they can be introduced.
- Another important change concerns the evaluation set-up. The previous proposal included many indicators, reporting obligations and a more detailed evaluation framework. The Commission wants a more centralised evaluation process, where all parts of Erasmus+ could be evaluated. This has important political implications, because money could potentially be redistributed according to performance. The framework for this does not yet exist and would still have to be created.
- Ad hoc working party on the MFF is far from finished. Key issue is the centralisation of the evaluation process.

## Erasmus+ and other agendas of the EU

- Another issue is whether Erasmus+ should contribute more directly to skills agenda, skills shortages and competitiveness. But this is not necessarily the main purpose of Erasmus+.
- Erasmus+ is traditionally more about values, cohesion, mobility, cooperation and European identity. It is not the same type of instrument as the European Competitiveness Fund. There is a risk that Erasmus+ could be pulled too strongly towards agendas that are not its core.



- The distribution of funds between sectors has not yet been discussed in detail. If the overall budget is known, the actual impact depends on how the money is distributed.

### Current figures

- Current budget proposal is around EUR 41 billion. The budget is under strong pressure because of the reconstruction of Ukraine, enlargement, defence, strategic sovereignty, and pressure on both national and EU budgets.
- It is unlikely that Erasmus+ will receive less than EUR 41 billion, but there is also little optimism that it will receive much more.
- The European Parliament is generally supportive of Erasmus+ but this does not necessarily mean that it will be able to secure a substantially higher budget.

### The Council partial position and the Parliament

- The European Parliament, especially the CULT Committee, is not expected to finalise its position before the end of September.
- There are many proposals from the Parliament, negotiations may start again from a significantly different basis.
- The Council mandate means that negotiations will have to take place between the Irish Presidency and CULT Committee.
- The Irish Presidency has many plans and scenarios, but it is difficult to plan without a clear deadline. The first step will be to compare the Council and Parliament positions and assess how far apart they are.
- Negotiations may continue until the end of 2027, with the hope that there will not be a major gap or difficult transition between the current and the next programme.

### Youth

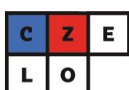
- Some countries have strong national youth policies and feel that youth has become too invisible in the programme. The current text contains more references to youth than previous versions.
- European Solidarity Corps is back in Erasmus+.
  - o Some countries welcome this, especially those that emphasise volunteering and youth service. Some Member States see this as adding complexity and administrative work. The main stakeholder on youth is the European Youth Forum, wants the youth budget to be doubled, but this is unlikely to happen.

### Sport (athletes' exchanges)

- In the previous programme, exchanges were possible for sport officials, but athletes themselves were not included.
- Member States have now removed athletes' exchanges from the text. The main problem is that the target group is too difficult to define. It is unclear who should count as an athlete and which of the athlete levels- amateur, semi-professional or professional athletes- should be included. The group could potentially be very large, which makes it difficult to set clear limits.

### Erasmus+ scholarships in certain strategic fields

- Member States were not necessarily against the idea, but they had many questions. One scholarship would cost around EUR 50,000, which is roughly 25 standard Erasmus+ exchanges. The Commission mainly had STEM and ICT in mind, but some Member States argued that other



fields could also be strategic. France, for example, mentioned agriculture in relation to self-sufficiency.

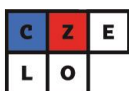
- Member States wanted the idea to be discussed further and did not want the Commission to define strategic fields too quickly or too narrowly.
- The scholarship proposal has now been replaced by the formulation “Talent and Excellence Development Opportunities”. It is still unclear what exactly this will mean. It may not be limited to higher education and could also include VET.
- Member States are not fully opposed to scholarships, but they are not interested in making Erasmus+ more elitist. Denmark was particularly sceptical, and Sweden and Finland also did not like the idea. There is also a concern that such scholarships may come too late if the aim is to address skills shortages. Interest in strategic fields often needs to be encouraged earlier, already among pupils, not only at university level. There is also a risk of shifting shortages from one field to another.

### Partial association

- The idea is mainly aimed at countries on the path to EU accession, such as Ukraine, which may not yet be ready to participate in the full Erasmus+ package. Such countries could take part only in selected parts of the programme, for example HE.
- Member States are concerned that this could create a precedent. Other countries, such as Canada, might also become interested in partial association then.
- Even if associated countries contribute financially, their participation still creates administrative pressure on the system. The more countries participate, the more complex the programme becomes.
- There were originally several models of partial association, the current text has landed on a more limited approach that partial association is only for accession countries.

### Questions

- Housing (ESN)
  - o Member States have not yet reached a clear position on this issue. The broader question is whether Erasmus+ should address housing directly, or whether housing should be dealt with through other EU instruments and policies. The broader problem is the complexity of EU policymaking, it is not always clear which instrument should address which issue.
- How to protect Erasmus+ from being “eaten up” by other policies?
  - o This is difficult because many new priorities are being attached to the programme. The Commission wants Erasmus+ to contribute to agendas such as competitiveness, skills and strategic priorities, while Member States are trying to protect the programme’s original identity and purpose.
- The Union of Skills and High-Level Skills Board
  - o The Council is generally not very enthusiastic about this. One concern is that the proposal was developed without sufficient attention to what can actually be discussed at EU level, since education remains primarily a MS competence.
- European Education Area



- New strategic approach expected to be negotiated among Member States in the coming months. The Council is waiting for the new Hungarian government and ministers to take a position on the EEA framework. The Commissioner's cabinet reportedly wants to reduce the number of existing working groups from around six or eight to three. The remaining groups would focus mainly on Commission priorities such as skills. Possible shift from Erasmus+ programme governance towards broader policy governance
  - The performance regulation is sensitive because it is not mainly handled by education ministries, but by finance ministries. This changes the nature of the discussion, since finance ministries may have different priorities from ministries responsible for education. The position taken may be strongly influenced by finance ministries.
- ERA governance vs EEA governance
    - Erasmus+ cannot simply move in the same direction, education remains a Member State competence. Horizon Europe works differently because research policy involves more technical expertise and therefore more experts participate in committees and working groups. In education, the political sensitivity is higher and Member States are more protective of their competences.
  - European Universities Initiative
    - France remains one of its strongest supporters. Other Member States increasingly question whether the results justify the amount of money spent. The original ambition was to achieve more results in more fields. There are visible outputs, such as joint study programmes, work on the European degree, discussions on legal status and networking between universities. Some Member States expected stronger academic results.
    - The aim was not only networking but also results that would allow European universities to compete with institutions such as Cambridge (after Brexit).
    - The Commission has promised an evaluation report on the European Universities Initiative, but nothing has been produced so far. Some Member States suspect that the Commission may not have strong evidence.
    - Southern EU Member States are more interested in the initiative, while enthusiasm among other Member States more generally seems to be declining.
    - The French delegation managed to include a definition of European Universities in the proposal. The Netherlands asked for a similar approach for Centres of Vocational Excellence. But it is unusual to define specific projects in legal texts.

## Conclusions

- Overall, the negotiations are still far from finalised. The main tensions concern governance, centralisation, the Programme Committee, performance-based evaluation, budget control, partial association, scholarships and the risk that Erasmus+ will increasingly be used to serve wider EU policy agendas.
- Member States generally want to preserve Erasmus+ as a programme focused on mobility, cooperation, values and cohesion. Commission is seeking more flexibility to link the programme to broader priorities such as skills, competitiveness and strategic sovereignty.

