

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing “Erasmus for all” — The Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport’

COM(2011) 788 final — 2011/0371 (COD)

(2012/C 181/27)

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On 12 December 2011 the Council and on 13 December 2011 the European Parliament decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on the

Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing ‘Erasmus for all’ — The Union Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport

COM(2011) 788 final — 2011/0371 (COD).

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 29 February 2012.

At its 479th plenary session, held on 28 and 29 March 2012 (meeting of 29 March), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 74 votes to 1 with 4 abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 At a time when the economic crisis has forced a review of budgetary priorities, the EESC stresses the importance of maintaining and increasing, wherever possible, the effective use of resources assigned at national and EU level to education and training with a view to improving the employment situation – particularly of young people and older workers.

1.2 The EESC believes that the *Erasmus for all* Programme should be a key instrument for increasing support for education and training in order to enhance citizens’ skills, help tackle the high levels of youth unemployment in many Member States, meet the need for qualified labour, and resolve skills mismatches. It is especially important to employ such an instrument at a time of economic crisis and negative repercussions on labour markets. Skill mismatches, where they exist, should be reduced in order to decrease unemployment, in particular among young people.

1.3 The EESC acknowledges the proposal for a significant budget increase of up to EUR 19 billion for a future programme and therefore supports the overall budget proposal by the European Commission, and calls on the European Parliament and the Council to support this increase.

1.4 Due to the current economic situation, the EESC strongly supports the measures proposed in the Programme: a clear focus on key actions; reduced fragmentation of current actions, objectives and programmes; extended use of lump sum, unit cost or flat rate grants, as well as reduction of formal requirements for beneficiaries and Member States; reduction of administrative workload for the National

Agencies; and the proposal that a single National Agency per country, where appropriate, should be charged with increasing critical mass and cutting down on management costs.

1.5 However, the Committee notes that, while applying austerity measures, it is necessary to take the long-term prospects of individual sectors into account and to apply the principles of reasonable austerity and ‘smart’ budgeting.

1.6 Taking all proposed austerity measures into account, the EESC strongly recommends retention of the separate and independent sub-Programmes with an individual minimum budget allocation for the main sectors in the Programme (namely, higher education, vocational education and training, adult education and learning, school education, youth initiatives, and sport) and the further development of these where appropriate. This applies in particular to the mobility of school-children and young people in classes or groups, the mobility of researchers and lecturers at universities, the integration of disadvantaged young people, preparatory visits, bilateral and multilateral educational projects and partnerships, and mobility and learning partnerships in adult education. Attention should be paid to the specific learning interests of women and men who are not working.

Many of the proposed administrative reforms would ensure that overall management costs remain essentially unchanged and that the separate sub-Programmes guarantee the intended impact and preserve the Programme initiatives from possible instability and decline.

1.7 The Committee stresses that education plays a very important role in addressing the current situation, and is pleased that this is reflected in the Programme. However, in order to implement the main strategic objectives of the EU, it

is necessary to pursue coherence of formal education and non-formal and informal learning, which means that non-formal and informal learning must be of equal significance to formal education in the current Programme proposal.

1.8 The EESC is concerned that some of the actions that currently work well and are appreciated in the Youth in Action Programme are missing, and that their absence may lead to a significant decline in European cooperation in the field of youth.

1.9 The EESC believes that acquiring and improving skills and knowledge involves more than the current key aim of eliminating barriers to employment, and encompasses **development of active citizenship and social cohesion**, but these objectives are not given attention in the proposal. Moreover, the role of the social partners should be strengthened as well as other civil society organisations in the new Erasmus Programme.

1.10 The EESC welcomes the objective of increasing learning mobility, as it is one of the factors allowing development of key skills, particularly ones relevant to the labour market and society, as well as increased participation of young people in democratic life in Europe. However, mobility by itself will not resolve the aforementioned issues. More attention should be paid to opportunities to apply the skills obtained through mobility actions, and to the significance of mobility in the lifelong learning process.

1.11 The Committee believes that learning should be accessible to all at all stages of life, and therefore strongly supports the proposed lifelong approach to learning aimed at putting various ways of accessing formal, non-formal or informal learning within equal reach of all. The EESC emphasises the call it has already made for: "Learning for a Long Life. However, the proposed Regulation does not seem to adopt such a lifelong learning approach in terms of opening the Programme up to all type of learners, from young children to seniors. The Programme should be more inclusive and tailored to each learner group; therefore, the EESC calls for an operational and clear definition of lifelong learning and more targeted policies for improving accessibility for each learner group.

1.12 Participants in Actions that form part of the Programme are to be seen as ambassadors of European values, which should be prominently reflected in the Programme.

1.13 The EESC recognises that the current Erasmus Programme has been a considerable success (as has, for instance, European Voluntary Service). At the same time, the Committee is concerned that the *Erasmus* brand is mainly recognisable among the wider public as a synonym for activities in higher education and formal education in general. The issue of better dissemination of information about Erasmus as a single concept for all sectors of education has not yet been addressed

and may cause additional obstacles, such as increased costs for public relations and other unforeseen expenses. The EESC is concerned that the dissemination of such a brand may not be possible or successful when only one year is left until the official start of the Programme. It is also recommended that the current names of the sub-programmes be kept.

1.14 The Committee is pleased that it has been decided to continue in full with Jean Monnet activities to promote university teaching and research on European integration, but feels that this specific support should not only focus on the two institutions mentioned in the European Commission's proposal. The Committee would like all six European academic institutions supported by the 2007-2013 Jean Monnet programme to be included here, in order to tap into the added value, academic contributions and greater cultural diversity offered by the other four institutions of European interest.

Therefore, the Committee proposes that Article 10 be amended as follows:

- c) support the following European academic institutions pursuing an aim of European interest;
 - (i) the European University Institute of Florence;
 - (ii) the College of Europe (Bruges and Natolin campuses);
 - (iii) the Academy of European Law in Trier;
 - (iv) the Centre International de Formation Européenne in Nice;
 - (v) the European Institute of Public Administration in Maastricht;
 - (vi) the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education in Odense;

2. The Commission's proposal

2.1 With *Erasmus for all* the Commission intends to bring together all the current EU and international schemes for education, training, youth and sport, replacing seven existing programmes – the Lifelong Learning Programme, Youth in Action, Erasmus Mundus, Tempus, Alfa, Edulink and the bilateral cooperation programme with industrialised countries – with one single programme. The stated purpose is to increase efficiency, make it easier to apply for grants and reduce duplication and fragmentation.

2.2 The Commission proposes an increase of approximately 70 % compared to the current seven-year budget, which would see EUR 19 billion allocated to the new programme for the period 2014-2020. Two-thirds of the funding is to be spent on individual mobility grants to enhance knowledge and skills.

2.3 The new Programme is expected to focus on EU added value and systemic impact, with support for three types of action: learning opportunities for individuals, both within the EU and beyond; institutional cooperation between educational institutions, youth organisations, businesses, local and regional authorities and NGOs; and support for reforms in Member States to modernise education and training systems and promote innovation, entrepreneurship and employability.

2.4 The Commission argues that the streamlined structure of the new Programme – together with its significantly increased investment – means the EU will be able to deliver many more opportunities for students, trainees, young people, teachers, youth workers and others to improve their skills, personal development and job prospects. *Erasmus for all* is intended to promote research and teaching on European integration, and support sport at the grassroots level.

2.5 The proposed Programme is expected to contribute to the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy (EU2020), Education and Training Strategic Framework 2020 (ET2020), European Cooperation in the Youth Field (2010-2018) and to the implementation of EU2020 flagship initiatives, such as Youth on the Move and the Agenda for New Skills, as well as to the sustainable development of third countries in the field of higher education and to developing the European dimension in sport.

3. General remarks

3.1 The main strategic documents of the EU in the areas of education, training and youth give equal priority to initiatives in the aforementioned areas. The EESC stresses that, while shaping the goals of the Programme, the impression must not be given that formal education has higher priority than non-formal and informal learning, such as adult and vocational education and training, school education, youth activities and sport. It is vital to avoid causing inequalities between the different sectors as it risks undermining the lifelong learning approach contained in the Programme.

3.2 The Committee welcomes the possibility of support for policy reforms, such as implementation of the Bologna and Copenhagen processes and the structured dialogue with young people, as well as the support for the implementation of EU transparency tools.

3.3 The Programme assures that the 'grants for learning mobility awarded to individuals shall be exempted from any taxes and social levies. The same exemption shall apply to intermediary bodies awarding such financial support to the individuals concerned'. The Committee is in favour of such exemptions and asks for the Commission, in cooperation with the Member States, to investigate and resolve cases (where, for example, mobility grants are credited to family income, triggering a loss of social support) seen in the implementation of the present mobility actions.

3.4 The inclusion of sport actions in the Programme as separate chapter with a dedicated budget is strongly supported,

as through transnational projects, capacity building for sports organisations and increased opportunities for partnership, it will ensure greater and more effective involvement of stakeholders in sport policy-making and better governance of sports bodies, as well as motivate European citizens, especially young people, to be more active.

3.5 The Committee acknowledges that a single National Agency within the Member States, where appropriate, with responsibility for managing the Programme Actions is likely to be a more effective solution in terms of 'user-friendliness', workload and cost effectiveness. However, the regional access should be ensured for grant applicants and it should be noted that the establishment of a single National Agency might not be in line with the various national contexts in the Member States. At the same time, overall administrative requirements for applicants, especially for non-governmental organisations in the field of non-formal learning, should not increase. On the contrary, the administrative burden should be constantly assessed and reduced. Also, the EESC encourages recommending Member States to more actively involve civil society and social partners in the government of the Programme at national level.

3.6 The EESC welcomes the aim of reducing the current complexity and fragmentation of separate objectives and Actions, in order to enhance cost-effectiveness and to discontinue the Actions that lack the critical mass required for long lasting impact. However, as stated in point 1.6 of this Opinion, the Committee strongly encourages the retention of separate and independent sub-Programmes with an individual minimum budget allocation for the main sectors in the Programme.

3.7 While more extensive efficiency and cost reduction measures are strongly supported, the Committee notes that the need for larger and more efficient projects must be balanced against the need for inclusiveness. The contribution to all forms of education made by small organisations cannot be underestimated and their access to the Programme must be maintained.

3.8 The Committee notes that mobility for schoolchildren is not mentioned in the Programme. It therefore points out that mobility facilities must be offered early on and not only at the stage of vocational or further education. In this context continuation of the successful Comenius School Partnerships, which include the possibility of short periods of mobility for schoolchildren, is of considerable importance.

3.9 The Committee notes that the measures taken in the Programme to improve the access of disadvantaged groups to mobility actions are insufficient. Broadening participation in education and learning for under-represented groups should become a clear priority, as it is essential to achieve more equitable societies, as well as economic growth. Currently, parents' education and socio-economic background still play a disproportionate role in the chances of individuals to access and succeed in education, and specific groups are under-represented in certain national contexts.

3.10 Quality and equity have to be balanced against quantity in mobility schemes in a way that allows those from disadvantaged backgrounds to take part – for example, by considering a review of the size of mobility grants, which are currently rated as inadequate and inflexible for the different economic environments of the participating countries ⁽¹⁾.

3.11 The possibility of utilising the European Social Fund and the structural funds to finance participation of young people from less developed regions in the individual learning mobility Actions, as well as in internships and apprenticeships in enterprises in other Member States, could be considered.

3.12 The Committee encourages greater efforts for improved data collection and analysis, particularly on employability, the social dimension, lifelong learning, the portability of grants and loans, and overall quality and impact of mobility, and proposes an ex-post evaluation of the mobility experience. Such data will help monitor the implementation of the Programme and allow active response to possible changes.

3.13 The Committee reiterates its support for the provision increasing the efficiency of the Programme's resources and reducing the duplication and fragmentation of current actions, and therefore invites broader consideration of this issue in principle and a review of all programmes existing under the authority of the European Commission with objectives that are fully or partly in line with the proposed Programme. For example, the *Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs*, which is partly financed by the Commission, is administered separately even though it may contribute to the objectives set out in *Erasmus for all*.

3.14 There is a lack of clarity about the current proportions of allocations mentioned in Point 3 of Article 13 (Budget). The Committee suggests an increase in the percentage allocated to cooperation for innovation and good practices, as most analysis carried out during previous stages of the lifelong learning programmes proved that institutional cooperation is highly cost-effective.

4. Education and training actions

4.1 The EESC acknowledges the higher budget allocation for vocational education and training. However, it is recommended that a clear target be set in the Programme, so that it contributes to achieving the VET benchmark: 'By 2020, an EU average of at least 6 % of 18-34 year olds with an initial vocational education and training qualification should have had an initial VET-related study or training period (including work placements) abroad lasting a minimum of two weeks (10 working days), or less if documented by Europass' ⁽²⁾. Furthermore, part of the budget should be earmarked for encouraging apprenticeship programmes.

⁽¹⁾ SEC(2011) 1402 final, COM(2011) 788 final.

⁽²⁾ Council conclusions on a benchmark for learning mobility, 3 128th Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting, 28-29.11.2011.

4.2 In view of this benchmark, specific efforts are needed to remove the practical, technical and legal obstacles to learning mobility, to support the sending and hosting of small and medium enterprises and increase the value of their engagement in mobility for apprentices and interns. Bearing in mind the amount and scope of activities in this sector and the findings in the *Impact Assessment on Education and Training Actions* ⁽³⁾, the Committee suggests considering if the currently proposed minimum allocation of 17 % for VET is sufficient.

4.3 The EESC also suggests identifying apprentices and interns as a separate target group in the Programme. This would help to implement the new political commitments on promoting apprenticeships and work-based learning to tackle high youth unemployment.

4.4 The EESC would like to underline the low participation of adults in lifelong learning and the low level of skills and qualifications of a large number of adults in Europe ⁽⁴⁾. In order to reach the ET2020 target of 'an average of at least 15 % of adults should participate in lifelong learning' ⁽⁵⁾, strong adult education systems, providers, methodology, staff and provision across Europe are needed. Adult education must be the place for active European citizenship, which a strong adult education programme can further develop and promote.

4.5 It is important that there be close links with vocational education and training, but a distinct stream for adult education is nevertheless necessary to tackle the challenges mentioned in point 4.4. Therefore, the Committee suggests considering retaining adult education and learning as a sector of its own in the Programme proposal.

4.6 While the proposed increase in the budget for adult education is welcome, the 2 % minimum allocation for adult education seems inadequate in view of the demographic ageing of Europe and the need to increase the participation of adults in lifelong learning. Taking into consideration that the adult education sector is very broad and accommodates a large number of social enterprises, a more pronounced increase should be considered.

4.7 With regard to adult education and learning, the Programme should more clearly contribute to the implementation of the *Renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning* ⁽⁶⁾. In supporting this agenda, the Programme has a real opportunity to boost progress and positive change in adult learning, which would mean an improvement in self-confidence, participation, activity, creativity, personal development and employability for a large number of European citizens.

⁽³⁾ Vocational education and training (VET) under the Leonardo da Vinci sub-Programme supports the development of the Copenhagen process and the implementation of quality systems for VET, and provides unique opportunities for internationalisation, mobility and innovation in VET.

⁽⁴⁾ COM(2007) 558 final.

⁽⁵⁾ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc34_en.htm.

⁽⁶⁾ Council Resolution on a renewed European Agenda for Adult Learning (16743/11), 17.11.2011.

4.8 Both Grundtvig workshops and Senior Volunteering have opened the opportunity of European participation to many people who would not otherwise have had the chance. Taking into consideration the benefits provided by these actions, the EESC points to the need to preserve equal opportunities for adult learners to participate in mobility schemes and volunteering.

4.9 The Committee finds the Programme invaluable as a way of achieving the Bologna process student mobility target ⁽⁷⁾, also set by the Council of the European Union ⁽⁸⁾: 'In 2020, at least 20 % of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad'. However, the EESC notes that the size of individual mobility grants has to be reviewed in order to allow those from disadvantaged backgrounds to have equal opportunities to participate in the mobility schemes.

4.10 Further development of joint programmes and joint degrees across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is encouraged, as joint programmes and joint degrees have the potential to bring attention to national rules and legislation that hamper mobility, as well as to increase the overall quality of education and foster international institutional cooperation.

4.11 Synchronisation of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) systems with ECTS and implementation of ECVET based on a learning outcomes approach is crucial to successfully reaching the Bologna student mobility target and assuring the quality of the mobility schemes and overall education and learning. The EESC notes that a number of countries have not linked ECTS and ECVET with learning outcomes and the goal of equal opportunities for all has not been achieved. Therefore, urgent actions should be considered in order to embed ECTS and ECVET as common tools in the EU as a way of ensuring transparency of qualifications for both students and employers.

4.12 The Committee would also like to stress that continued coordination at the European level is needed to help Member States to adopt measures, so that all new qualification documents contain a clear reference, by way of national qualification systems, to the appropriate European Qualifications Framework level. As it is clear that this target ⁽⁹⁾ will not be reached until the official deadline of 2012, further coordination and action are needed to accelerate the implementation of EQF.

4.13 The EESC proposes placing higher priority on staff mobility, which greatly contributes to high quality education programmes and to more internationally oriented institutions. The Committee asks for closer cooperation with the Member

States to remove obstacles to staff mobility linked to social security systems, pension arrangements and professional recognition.

4.14 Following the statement of the EESC in the opinion on the *Youth on the Move* initiative ⁽¹⁰⁾, the Committee asks for a more detailed description of the proposed loan scheme for students who undertake a Master's degree in another EU country to ensure that the procedure for granting loans is carefully drawn up, and young people informed of it, as it is important to prevent them, as far as possible, from becoming trapped in a spiral of debt. Considering the efforts to establish the proposed loan scheme, it should be ensured that such loans are attractive and affordable (especially to disadvantaged students) in order to reach the estimated total of 331 100 students.

4.15 In addition, the Committee asks to evaluate all possible consequences of the proposed loan scheme, including the impact on the national and regional financial support systems and towards the size of tuition fees in higher education institutions. The results of such evaluation should be disseminated as widely as possible.

4.16 In addition to the proposed loan scheme, the EESC asks the European Union institutions to further underpin the national efforts by the Member States through its policies to ensure the full portability of national grants and loans across the EU in promoting mobility and ensuring equal access to mobility and education.

5. Youth actions

5.1 The EESC highlights the efficiency of the current *Youth in Action* programme ⁽¹¹⁾. It is estimated that *Youth in Action* will have provided around 1 000 000 young Europeans with experience of non-formal education and opportunities for mobility, and it is clear that the current programme has made a lasting impact on young Europeans by supporting youth organisations. Thus, the impact of *Youth in Action* on young people might be seen as greater than that of any other EU programme, which is not adequately reflected in the proposal.

5.2 The Committee is concerned that the present proposal tends to treat its beneficiaries unequally and make it harder to reach those disadvantaged young people that can presently access the *Youth in Action* programme through small and local youth organisations.

5.3 The EESC believes that a stronger political and financial priority in the Programme should be given to youth and youth policy, bearing in mind the number of the targets associated with youth in the EU2020 and ET2020 strategies and in European Cooperation in the Youth Field (2010-2018), as well as in the flagship initiatives such as *Youth on the Move* and the *Agenda for New Skills and Jobs*.

⁽⁷⁾ Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29.4.2009.

⁽⁸⁾ Council conclusions on the modernisation of higher education, 3 128th Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting, 28-29.11.2011.

⁽⁹⁾ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (2008/C 111/01), 23.4.2008.

⁽¹⁰⁾ OJ C 132/55, 3.5.2011.

⁽¹¹⁾ SEC(2011) 1402 final, COM(2011) 788 final.

5.4 Considering the scope and amount of activities and the number of participants in the current *Youth in Action* programme, as well as the ability to involve ones from disadvantaged groups, the Committee asks for a reconsideration of whether the proposed minimum allocation to youth of only 7 % will ensure that the objectives set for the youth sector will be achieved, and that a separate youth action sub-programme be designed as part of the Programme with an adequate allocated budget. Such an approach was already stated in the Committee's Opinion on the *Youth on the Move* initiative⁽¹²⁾. All the current sub-Actions of the *Youth in Action* Programme should be maintained.

5.5 The Committee stresses that currently the Youth in Action programme helps to support activities that would not be supported otherwise through alternative funding sources, and that it is one of the main sources of funding for youth projects. This particularly applies to small and local/regional organisations. The lack of such support could cause serious negative consequences for the European youth sector. In the event of such a situation, many youth organisations might become less Europe-focused, as it is the European networks that support smaller and local organisations to take part in European

programmes. This would leave space for only large organisations and institutions, directly disadvantaging local, regional and small organisations.

5.6 The Committee notes that the Programme should more clearly contribute towards the implementation of Article 165(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union: 'encouraging the development of youth exchanges and of exchanges of socio-educational instructors, and encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe'.

6. Measures in response to demographic change

For the EU funding period 2014-2020, the EESC proposes having a separate funding programme entitled 'Generations in Action.' Dialogue between the generations is called for in many programmes and proposals, such as in the fields of active and healthy ageing, sustainability (a sustainable lifestyle), energy efficiency, etc.

The EESC is convinced that mobility for both young and old helps to strengthen mutual respect, promote social cohesion and maintain shared responsibility for European values.

Brussels, 29 March 2012.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Staffan NILSSON

⁽¹²⁾ OJ C 132/55, 03.05.2011.