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# ***Do's and don'ts of ERASMUS+ funding applications***

*The Erasmus+ Programme Guide defines the purpose of the programme, implemented through numerous competitive calls for funding applications, as follows (European Commission 2021): “The general objective of the Programme is to support, through lifelong learning, the educational, professional and personal development of people in education, training, youth and sport, in Europe and beyond, thereby contributing to sustainable growth, quality jobs and social cohesion, to driving innovation, and to strengthening European identity and active citizenship.” The funding decisions are based on the work of independent experts who study the applications carefully and evaluate them against detailed award criteria, published in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide for the information of potential applicants. The following “do's and don'ts” are based on the author's long experience on applying this award criteria as an independent expert to Cooperation Partnerships applications submitted to the Finnish national Erasmus+ agency.*

## ***Relevance of the project***

It is very important to understand that only such projects can receive funding which contribute to the general objective of the programme. In practice, this means that in the case of Cooperation Partnerships applications, the focus of the project should be on tackling the challenges of European higher education. If the main interest of the project team appears to be in advances in the application domain, for instance in the form of new technical developments, there is a risk that the application will be considered out of the scope of this funding instrument.

Another crucial aspect of relevance is need for the project. Poor needs analysis is probably the most common reason for the failure of

applications. It is not enough just to claim that there is a real and urgent need for the project. Statements about the need should be backed up by a proper needs analysis, preferably with references to data from sources which are independent from the project team. The project should tackle specific gaps in the competences and educational offering of the partner universities, and at the same time make a valuable contribution at the European level. Furthermore, the project should represent a clear and significant step forward considering the earlier work of the partners.

Innovativeness is a tricky issue. The project does not need to explore the unknown to be considered innovative in this context. However, considerable level of ambition is required. Furthermore, it should be shown that the project team is familiar with the state-of-the-art of the topic, and that the project will build on the state-of-the-art and the earlier work of the partners in a meaningful way.

Another aspect of relevance is the European dimension of the project. Usually, this is not a problem if the partners have a common objective and well-described joint activities towards it. However, if the project team fails to consider this issue, it may happen that the proposed work appears to be very institution and country specific, indicating that the added value at European level might remain low.

### ***Quality of the project design and implementation***

It should be made very clear what are the objectives of the project. The objectives should be ambitious but still realistic. They should be in line with the general objective of the programme and provide answers to the needs described in the needs analysis section of the application, preferably in the form of a clear positive and sustainable change to current situation. Unclear objectives are a very bad sign indicating that the project team may have had problems defining what they would like to do.

Methodological issues should also be discussed, but briefly if possible. The intention is to show that the proposed approach and the associated activities are methodologically sound. If one of the partners is an expert of a certain methodology and wants to promote it, there is a risk that the partner in question appears to be dominating too much and perhaps even pushing their methodology over other more suitable methodologies.

The work plan should be clear and the activities should form a logical path from the objectives to the expected outcomes of the project. There should be enough detail to understand how the proposed work leads to outcomes, making the project meet its objectives. The work plan should focus on describing what will be done. Discussing what can be done may be appropriate in the needs analysis part of the application but not as part of the work plan.

The results (outcomes) should always be tangible. A good approach is to consider each result as something that will be useful to outsiders when it is made publicly available as a standalone item. In addition, the results should always be relevant for the objectives of the project. Too many results should not be promised, but an ambitious project need to be ambitious also concerning the amount and quality of its outcomes, without losing its focus.

An appropriate amount of outcomes with good potential for further use usually leads to good cost-efficiency of the project. However, in case of learning module-type outcomes with associated ECTS value, it is important to make sure that the cost of the project per ECTS is low enough. Majority of applications include such outcomes and looking at the cost per ECTS is an easy way of ranking them from one angle.

Mobility is a key element of the Erasmus+ programme. Normally, also Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships applications are expected to include activities involving mobility of staff and students. However, the proposed training, teaching or learning activities involving mobility should always contribute directly to the outcomes of the project. Mobility without very clear added value to the project is not acceptable nowadays when projects are expected to follow green practices and avoid unnecessary travelling.

There are also horizontal priorities of the programme to be dealt with. It is increasingly important to show that the project has been designed to promote inclusion, digitalization and green practices. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily influence the project content-wise, but the way that the project is designed and carried out. It is important to keep a clear focus of the project although these horizontal considerations may have to be embedded in the texts throughout the application.

## ***Quality of the partnership and the cooperation arrangements***

Partnership is the issue to be taken under careful consideration as the first thing when the planning of a project is started. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, negotiations with partners about their participation and the associated decisions may take a long time. Sometimes a potential partner withdraws during negotiations and needs to be replaced with another. Secondly, once the application writing work is already in progress with partners, changes in the partnership lead to complex changes in the application, possibly involving reallocation of project tasks and budget, and even reorientation of the project's content.

It is unfortunately so that forming the partnership based on friendship, earlier co-operation or shared professional interest does not usually work out well. Of course, it is easier to go ahead with someone you know and trust. However, making the composition of the partnership such that it fulfils the criteria of the programme as perfectly as possible should be the priority. It is advisable to aim at a multidisciplinary partnership because that usually opens up possibilities for obtaining a higher score in novelty of the project. It is also a great advantage to the application if the partnership includes partners who are known as forerunners or leading experts in their profession at European level and internationally in fields of expertise relevant to the project. Furthermore, every partner should be able to list a few key persons with strong expertise in relevant themes, and a few earlier projects forming a good basis for their work in the project.

Partnership is like a puzzle where the expertise areas of the partners are the pieces. Putting the pieces together in the correct way makes up the whole picture. There should be no overlapping, missing or extra pieces. However, this is not enough. The partnership should also be balanced geographically and preferably include organisations of various types with differing angles to the project. If the partnership is composed of higher education institutions only, there is a risk that the project is considered weak in its relevance to the working life. Even when the partnership also includes other types of organisations, either as full partners or associated ones, it is important to show in the application that they will participate actively in the activities of the project, preferably being responsible of

some of the activities. Furthermore, it is also necessary to describe how the project will communicate with a wider community of stakeholders in order to strengthen the project's relevance to them.

Project coordination arrangements and practices need to be planned and described clearly in the application, but perhaps more important is to convince the reader of the application about the coordination experience and expertise of the lead partner and their staff. Experienced coordinators are highly valued. Involving a professional project coordinator is one option but it might still be better if domain expertise and project expertise were combined in a single person having capability to become the leading figure of the project.

### ***Impact***

It is a common mistake to write the texts dealing with impact and dissemination in a hurry just before the deadline for applications. In many applications, this part of the application is the weakest part with a lot of underutilized potential for obtaining a significantly higher score. We tend to plan projects by first defining the problem to be solved, then designing a set of activities to tackle the problem, and finally specifying what will come out of the project as a result of the activities, leaving impact without serious consideration until the very end. It would be advisable to turn this logic upside down for a while early enough in the process, starting from the desired impacts, proceeding to outcomes required to reach the impacts, and further on to activities to be carried out in order to obtain the required outcomes.

If the project focuses narrowly on a specific field, there is a risk that its outcomes are considered relevant and useful only for a small number of beneficiaries. In order to get a high score on impact for such applications, it is important to show that the outcomes are applicable in other fields, too, and can be easily transferred and adapted. Dissemination should then be planned in such a way that it reaches beneficiaries from several potential fields of application.

Another possible problem with impact is that the outcomes may contain institution or country specific features which make their wider use difficult. Sometimes there are also requirements dealing with infrastructure. It is



important to identify this kind of problems early in the application writing process and to seek ways to avoid or minimize them. In any case, it should be shown in the application that the project team is aware of these issues and has plans for dealing with them.

Dissemination should be described in adequate detail. It is common that ambitious visions on the dissemination of the results of the project to a long list of target groups are presented but concrete and effective steps to make the visions true are missing.

Finally, sustainability of the outcomes after the project and arrangements for open access to them should also be given serious consideration in the application. If the project team can come up with credible solutions for keeping the outcomes up to date and available without further project funding, the application will certainly stand out from the mass and get a higher score for impact.

## ***Conclusion***

Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships funding is an excellent tool for boosting the internationalization of universities, deepening the co-operation between them, and developing pedagogically innovative degree programmes and learning materials for international students jointly with other European universities. Consequently, TAMK has been very active in preparing funding applications for the calls of this programme, often in the role of a partner in applications coordinated by others, but now and then also as the coordinator. The success rate has been fairly good, but there is still a lot of room for improvement, particularly in how lessons learnt from past successes and failures are used for supporting the preparation of new applications. The author hopes that this article finds its place as one tool for that.

## ***References***

European Commission. 2021. Erasmus+ Programme Guide. <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-11/2022-erasmusplus-programme-guide.pdf>