

EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA

STANDING COMMITTEE OF THE EFTA STATES

Ref. 1111481

23 January 2012

SUBCOMMITTEE IV ON FLANKING AND HORIZONTAL POLICIES

EEA EFTA Comment on the Proposed EU Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, “Erasmus for All” (2014–2020)

1. INTRODUCTION

The EEA EFTA States, Iceland Liechtenstein and Norway, welcome the Commission’s proposal for the EU Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport, “Erasmus for All” (2014–2020). As participants in EU programmes in this field, such as the Lifelong Learning Programme, Youth in Action and Erasmus Mundus, the EEA EFTA States hope to continue to play an active part in future programmes, and would hereby like to present some comments on the priorities and shaping of this future programme. We would like to draw the Commission’s attention to our previous EEA EFTA Comment on this matter, which was submitted to the Commission on 5 May 2011.

2. STRUCTURE

The EEA EFTA States believe it is important to retain the established brand names used in the Lifelong Learning and Youth in Action programmes. These programmes have proven to be successful, as underlined by the midterm evaluations. The EEA EFTA States would therefore strongly recommend including a broader, more explicit description of the content of the education and youth elements in the legal text. We do not believe that maintaining the brand name “Erasmus” alone is sufficient enough to make the various elements of the programme recognisable to the target group and users of the programme. Another option would be to introduce a new brand name for the whole programme. It is also important to have a legal text that will facilitate the understanding of the specific content of the various elements. In this context, the chapter on sports, which will receive a very small part of the total budget, has a clear and concrete text.

The EEA EFTA States welcome the simplified and streamlined approach and believe it will increase the overall impact of the programme. The EEA EFTA States would, however, like to see more concrete proposals on simplifying the administrative requirements and bureaucratic burdens on the programme’s users, thus making it more user-friendly.

The focus on early childhood education and care is particularly important to secure a good basis for lifelong learning for everyone, irrespective of background. To further enhance the quality of pre-school education, the new programme should prioritise cooperation activities within this field.

The EEA EFTA States welcome the increased focus on young people in European policies and programmes. The new programme should maintain the positive impact that Youth in Action has had on young people in terms of active citizenship in Europe, whilst continuing to focus on creating equal opportunities for all young people, for example by supporting small scale projects.

The EEA EFTA States welcome the emphasis on mobility which is in line with the Youth on the Move flagship initiative and will hopefully contribute to removing the major obstacles to mobility.

The EEA EFTA States take note of the strong focus on higher education in the proposal, and would like to point out the vital importance of other educational levels, for example in order to tackle early school leaving.

More emphasis and visibility needs to be given to the adult learning and informal learning parts of the programme, as well as to vocational education and training. This should be done by increasing the proposed minimum budget allocated to these sectors, which are important for improving the skills of people in the labour market. The Agenda for New Skills and Jobs (COM(2010) 682 Final 25.11.2010) could figure more prominently in the presentation of the new programme and the challenges identified by Cedefop's Skill Needs Analysis should be explicitly recognised as an important objective of the programme.

The EEA EFTA States welcome the focus on the importance of collaboration between education and businesses through strategic partnerships and knowledge/sectoral skills alliances. These measures will hopefully improve the employability of young people in general. Further information about what types of projects will fall under cooperation partnership is awaited.

The EEA EFTA States support keeping the Jean Monnet action to a great extent unchanged, but do not see the reasoning behind the decision to have it as a separate pillar, rather than as part of the Erasmus higher education strand.

The EEA EFTA States welcome the new mechanisms guaranteeing loans for Masters students, but would like to point out that the EEA EFTA national systems provide favourable as well as portable loans for studies abroad.

Lastly, the EEA EFTA States are slightly concerned by the Commission's conclusion to categorise its proposal for "Erasmus for All" as a regulation rather than a decision, which has been the case for the previous programmes, and would therefore ask that the proposal be presented as a decision.

3. MANAGEMENT

We are aware that some parts of the Lifelong Learning Programme have been eliminated or will be managed by different directorates-general, such as mobility of young people in the labour market and continuing training of adults in the labour market. This raises concerns about management and promotion at national level.

The EEA EFTA States support the idea of the establishment of a single coordinating national agency in each country with the aim of increasing synergies and efficiency.

4. FINANCING

In principle the EEA EFTA States support an increase in the EU budget for education, training, youth and sport, but would like to point out that a steep increase might cause some problems nationally.

The EEA EFTA States are also concerned about the role of the European Structural Funds (ESF) as they do not have access to these funds. A decrease in participation by the EEA EFTA States in the European collaboration can be expected, as some of the current Lifelong Learning Programme actions, such as the education of lower skilled people in the labour market, will be managed by the ESF.

The EEA EFTA States welcome performance-based funding but are concerned that this method might affect financial support to smaller participating countries.

As far as the EEA EFTA States understand, some of the financing of activities in “Erasmus for All” include budget lines that today are not covered by the EEA Agreement. We are concerned that the inclusion of Budget Action 4 (External Cooperation) as a funding source for the new programme could potentially limit our participation. It is very important for us to continue our valued and successful participation in these programmes, and would therefore suggest that this be taken into consideration so as not to exclude non-EU Member States. We are ready to discuss this situation with the Commission and the Member States at the right time and at the right level in order to find a pragmatic solution that will benefit all parties concerned.
