

Understanding Erasmus+:

How the European programme works and how ETBs and their staff can get involved

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At the May 2014 launch of the European Union's Erasmus+ programme in Ireland, the then Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairí Quinn TD, told the audience of educators, youth workers and policy makers that "The days of apartheid and compartmentalisation in education are over. We now have a joined-up system of Education and Training, ending the previous divide". The Minister's message was clear: where formerly there had been a wide range of European initiatives to serve these sectors, each with different rules and procedures, from now there would be one. The separate strands of the EU Lifelong Learning and Youth in Action programmes, which ran from 2007 to 2013, had been integrated into one initiative with simpler funding rules and a consolidated structure (a case of *e pluribus Erasmus+* perhaps).

Erasmus+ started in 2014 and will run until 2020 in all the EU member states plus the EFTA countries of Liechtenstein, Norway, Iceland, Turkey and Macedonia. The total budget for the programme will be €14.7 billion and it's estimated that four million Europeans will benefit from the programme during its lifecycle. This could be by working, studying, volunteering, training, or job shadowing in another country, or by availing of improvements in education and training brought about through exchange of expertise across Europe. The ultimate aims of Erasmus+ are to modernise teaching and learning across Europe, to improve key competences and skills, and to increase connection between education and employment, in order to bring about a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy by 2020 for all of Europe's citizens.

To achieve these aims, Erasmus+ provides funding to public or private organisations active in the fields of adult education, higher education, school education, sport, vocational education and training, and youth work to carry out projects that encourage European exchange, cooperation and learning. (It's important to note that people interested in participating in Erasmus+ projects cannot apply individually; instead they apply to the organisation which coordinates a particular project.) Given the enormous size and scope of the programme, it's not surprising that some project types are managed directly by the European Commission in Brussels, while others (called 'decentralised actions') are managed by National Agencies in the member states. Léargas is the National Agency for all Erasmus+ decentralised actions in Ireland, with the exception of higher education which is managed by the Higher Education Authority.

Since the launch of the programme in 2014, Léargas has funded 164 projects under Erasmus+, and distributed close to €10 million in project finance. Clearly, many education and training organisations have embraced the opportunities available and projects are underway in all areas of the country. However, some confusion remains about how exactly the new programme operates, for while the structure is integrated it is not always easy to navigate! In addition, organisations new to European projects can struggle with EU terminology and the sometimes complex regulations required for any programme implemented in 28 different countries. The remainder of this article therefore will seek to clarify how Erasmus+ works and how it can benefit Ireland's learners,

educators, young people, volunteers and policy makers alike.

Structurally, Erasmus+ is divided according to two categories: the sector the project will target (adult education, school education, vocational education and training, youth), and the type of project proposed. There are three main project types, known in Erasmus+ parlance as 'Key Actions'. Key Action 1, or KA1, is for projects which focus on 'Learning mobility of individuals'. 'Mobility' here simply means the act of physically moving from one country to another, so this action is for any project where the principal activity is learners or staff travelling to another country for a period of learning or professional experience. A minimum of two organisations from two different countries must participate in this type of project. Irish examples include:

- A College of Further Education sending its tourism and leisure trainees for work experience in hotels and tourist offices in Malta
- A post-primary school sending its language teachers to observe and job shadow in France, Spain and Germany
- An adult education organisation sending core staff members to training courses on Leadership in Denmark.

Key Action 2 (KA2) is for projects where the main activity is 'Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices'. Léargas manages the 'Strategic Partnerships' element of this action, which involves organisations in different counties working together on projects in areas of joint interest. These projects can be small or large scale, and

involve organisations from the same or different sectors. However, all projects should support the development, transfer or implementation of innovative practices which will ultimately be shared with the wider community. In general, a minimum of three organisations from three different countries must take part (there are some exceptions for certain types of school education and youth projects where only two organisations from two countries are required). Irish examples of this type of project include:

- Further education colleges in Ireland, France and Spain developing an online training course for their culinary trainees, which will be made accessible to all such colleges when finished (this would be a VET-specific partnership)
- A post-primary school working with a school in Estonia to enhance digital literacy, supported by pupil and teacher exchanges between the schools and resulting in the development of a handbook (school-to-school partnership)
- An adult education organisation working with a Finnish technology company and an Italian university language department to develop interactive language learning materials suitable for adults (cross-sectoral partnership).

Key Action 3 (KA3), 'Support for policy reform', is open only to the youth sector and is for projects which support dialogue between young people and policy makers. For example, a youth work organisation might facilitate discussion between young people and community leaders about increasing young people's participation in civil society. Unlike the other Key Actions, which require the participation of partners from other countries, KA3 projects can take place at national as well as transnational level.

In all projects there is an emphasis on making use of the results beyond the lifecycle of the project itself, by sharing them with other relevant groups and



Students from Coláiste Bhríde, Carnew, Co Wicklow at the launch of Erasmus+.

making attempts to mainstream the project learning within the relevant sector.

So how can Irish education and training organisations get involved in these projects? One option is to become a partner in a project led by an organisation in another country. This can be a good starting point for organisations not yet ready to take on the administrative load of coordinating and reporting on an entire project themselves, as only the lead partner in a project has these responsibilities. However, many organisations choose to develop and coordinate their own projects as a first step in European engagement, and have been successful in doing so.

Naturally, the programme is competitive and the application process requires a good deal of planning and forethought. Projects should address the identified needs of the organisations involved, and all activities must be designed in order to meet these needs. Projects should also be viewed as part of a wider European Development Plan for the organisation, rather than a distinct piece of work to be completed in isolation.

Any organisation which has an idea for a project is advised to get in contact with Léargas, as we hold information sessions and application workshops for each sector. There is a great deal of support available in carrying out a

project as well as in the application process. While organisations should of course be aware of the time and effort they will have to commit to manage a project successfully, they should not feel daunted by the prospect of applying. In all Erasmus+ projects funding is available for the costs directly associated with operating the project as well as for the particular activities concerned, so that organisations both large and small can take part in the programme. In general, funding is calculated on a per unit basis (e.g. a lump sum is paid for travel costs, or subsistence while abroad or participating in transnational meetings) rather than on actual costs, so project organisers do not have to save and submit every receipt!

There is one deadline in spring each year for applications in the Education and Training fields, and three deadlines each year for Youth applications. No matter what the field, information and support is available from the National Agencies to encourage educational organisations to benefit from the new opportunities on offer.

For more information about Erasmus+, visit:
www.leargas.ie (School Education, Adult Education, Vocational Education and Training, Youth)
www.eurireland.ie (Higher Education)
www.ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus