Report 2018:1

Lessons learned
from the 2014 Call

# Swedish Participation in
# Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships

Swedish Council for
Higher Education

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# Table of contents

# Summary

The first Strategic Partnerships projects founded by the Erasmus+ programme are now finalised. They have completed a whole project life-cycle, from application to approval, implementation and final reporting. Completion of the first approved projects provided an early opportunity for documentation and analysis of successes and areas of improvement.

The study is based on interviews with coordinators for recently finished projects, as well as interviews with external experts who evaluated applications and final reports. The coordinators share their experiences of project management, from planning and implementation, to completion. The external experts discuss the challenges of evaluating both applications and final reports. Based on the interviews, we have formulated recommendations on application processes and project implementation, as well as evaluation activities and the promotion of Erasmus+.

The coordinators feel that having partners from different countries coming together in a shared project is extremely positive and is often fundamental to the project's work. Different experiences are necessary for the results to be more general and useable in larger contexts. An international partnership also offers good opportunities to disseminate results if all partners are involved in outreach communication.

Many of the coordinators have good experiences of the heterogeneous composition of partnerships. Having several education sectors or several types of organisations present in the partnership widens approaches and perspectives. These differing experiences enrich the partnership and can often make dissemination more efficient, because a partnership with broader composition has access to a greater range of communication channels.

Anyone who wants to create an effective partnership and a credible project application should carefully consider the project's motivation and societal relevance: why is the project important and for whom? According to many of the interviewed experts, this is an area where applications are often lacking. If the proposed measures derive from a need for knowledge, this must be clear for the sake of both the project and a good application.

The amount of work involved in being a coordinator varies greatly between organisations. Some projects are coordinated by administrators who are often experienced project managers and have this as their primary task. It is more difficult for coordinators who are also teachers. The competition for working hours between teaching and the coordination of an international project is a great challenge. This is particularly difficult for teachers in compulsory/upper-secondary schools. It is easier for teaching staff in higher education to combine coordination with teaching since they have greater freedom in allocating their working hours. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are also better prepared for adjusting staffing when lecturers are periodically engaged in externally funded projects.

It is very common that Erasmus+ funded projects consist of established partnerships that have worked together on previous projects. It is also common for the coordinator to have many years of experience of working on international projects. Newly established partnerships and first-time applicants are less successful in this competition. The dominance of established partnerships and experienced coordinators is not only a worry for those who have their applications rejected, it is also a problem for Erasmus+ if inexperienced coordinators do not find it worthwhile to establish a partnership and apply for funding. Widening participation in the programme and making it easier for first-time applicants should be given particular attention.

# Gathering experience

The first projects financed by Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships were concluded in the autumn of 2016; this was when the two-year projects that were granted financing from the first Call for Proposals in 2014 had completed their activities, submitted reports and had their final reports evaluated by the Swedish Council for Higher Education (UHR). When an initial project cycle has finished, it provides an opportunity to document the Swedish participation and the experiences of those involved.

For this report, we have interviewed coordinators for completed Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships. We have also interviewed external experts who have participated in UHR's decisions on granting projects and approving final reports. Based on the interviews, we have formulated recommendations related to applications and project implementation, evaluation activities and programme marketing. In addition to contributing to the programme's development, the study's purpose has also been to transfer experience from people who are currently in some way involved with Erasmus+ to those who are considering participation in the future.

# Strategic Partnerships, a new element in Erasmus+

The European Commission's programme in the field of education, Erasmus+, which started in 2014, is a development of the previous Lifelong Learning Programme, LLP (2007-2013). The LLP was divided into sector-based sub-programmes for the financing of European mobility and project partnerships in the field of education. In 2014, most of these forms of funding merged into a large, single programme, Erasmus+. Erasmus+ brought similar rules and conditions regardless of the education sector, as well as increased opportunities for cross-sectional partnerships.

The Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships programme offers funding for collaboration in project form and is for all education sectors. Projects that include multiple education sectors, cross-sector projects, are particularly encouraged. Each partnership should choose its primary education sector and there are some differences in the rules depending on the choice of main sector. The five sectors are higher education, adult education, school education, vocational education and training, and youth. Of these five, UHR administers the first four and the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF) the fifth – the youth sector.

## Definitions

All projects funded by Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships must have partners from at least three different countries. The only exception is projects funded by *Strategic Partnerships for Schools Only*, which may have partners from two countries. Partnerships of this kind, across national borders, comprise of the cornerstones of Erasmus+. In this report, we have chosen to call this type of partnership *international*, without differentiating between partnerships between European countries and between Europe and the rest of the world.

A *partnership* is a group of organisations that cooperate for a length of time. During the time they receive funding from Erasmus+, the partnership is conducting a *project*. When the allocation period of the funding is over, the project also ceases. However, the partnership can continue to exist and cooperate in new projects.

Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships are open for participation from all types of organisations, as long as the project has links to the programme's priorities. In a project, one of the participating organisations must be the *coordinator*. The coordinator submits the application and is responsible for implementation and reporting when the project period is over. Organisations that receive funding must be based in one of the programme countries (countries that fund and administer the programme). Organisations from all other countries (partner countries) can participate using funding from the project budget if there are specific reasons for this.

# Priorities vary

An annual Call for Proposals is made in Erasmus+, with updated priorities that all applicants have to consider. For a project application to be regarded as relevant it must be linked to one or more of the priorities. There are general priorities for the entire programme and specific ones for a particular education sector. For example, a specific priority for strategic partnerships in adult education during 2017 was "Extending and developing educators' competences, particularly in the effective teaching of literacy, numeracy and digital skills to low-skilled or low-qualified adults, including through the effective use of ICT".

In addition to a compulsory priority, the applicant also chooses one or more topics that the project is about. These are chosen from a ready-made list.

## UHR uses external experts

Programme officers at UHR check the applications when submitted. External experts who have solid experience of their education sector then evaluate applications that fulfil the programme's requirements. An external expert has often been professionally active in the sector in which they evaluate applications. For example, external experts for applications from higher education are usually senior lecturers or professors. External experts for applications from compulsory schools and upper-secondary schools are usually teachers, headteachers or municipal officers with a suitable background. Some experts may sometimes have expertise in several education sectors and can evaluate applications from multiple sectors. Two experts individually evaluate each application and award points. When the individual evaluations are finished the experts make a comparison and agree on a joint opinion about the application including suggested evaluation points and comments. If there is more than a 30-point difference in an evaluation, a third external expert is appointed. The experts report the consolidated evaluation in the European Commission's evaluation tool.

Applications are evaluated according to four criteria (see Table 1). Applications that receive less than half of the points for any of these four criteria or less than 60% of the total points will not be approved, regardless of competition. This also means that it may be the case that unallocated funding remains despite not all applications being granted.

Table 1. Award criteria and subtotals for points used when evaluating both the application and the final report for projects in Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships.

| Award criteria | Max points |
|---|---|
| Relevance of the project | 30 |
| Quality of the project design and implementation | 20 |
| Quality of the project team and the cooperation arrangements | 20 |
| Impact and dissemination | 30 |
| **Total max points** | **100** |

Nordic development work on evaluation was initiated during the first applications round for partnership projects within Erasmus+. In addition to pure evaluation training, external experts from Nordic countries also evaluated applications from different countries and then compared and discussed their evaluations.

## UHR grants partnerships per sector

After evaluation, applications are are ranked in sectors depending on what points the application received. Decisions on which projects in each sector will receive funding are taken separately, which means that projects compete with other projects, but only within the same sector. Those that received the highest points will be funded according to the list as long as there is funding available for the activities. If there are unutilized funds when all approved projects in a sector have been awarded funding, funds may be transferred to other sectors.

An internal selection committee discusses proposed projects before UHR makes a decision. After this, a decision letter is sent to all applicants. Points and comments are included in the decision letter.

## From final report to the project's final letter

The project coordinator creates the final report by filling in an online form with set headings. The form is accessible throughout the project period, which makes it possible to describe the results of project activities as they are implemented. In the final report, the coordinator describes the project's governance, implementation and follow-up. There is also a separate section for financial reporting.

The final reports are evaluated by external experts, in the same way as the applications. However, each final report is evaluated by just one expert. Often, the people who evaluate the final reports have also evaluated applications.

For finished projects, the coordinator receives a final letter with pointers and comments decided on by UHR. This letter also regulates the final payment. If parts of the project have not been implemented or were of a smaller scope than planned, the final payment is adjusted to a lesser amount than was originally granted. If the project received low points in the evaluation (less than 50 points of the 100 possible) there may also be deductions to a standard proportion of the total amount.

# Method

With the ambition of documenting and learning from the Swedish participation in Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships, we have chosen to study a selection of projects and the decision-making process that govern the granting and approval of completed projects. We have conducted the study by examining written documentation and through interviews with project coordinators and experts who evaluated applications and final reports. To help us, we have had a reference group consisting of programme officers at UHR who work with the programme's administration.

## Selection of projects for inclusion in the study

Funding as part of Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships is awarded using allocation into the educations sectors of schools, vocational education and training, adult education, higher education, and youth. The youth sector is not included in this study because it is outside UHR's area of responsibility and is instead administered by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society. In our selection of projects for closer review and interviews with coordinators, we have strived for an even distribution of sectors. This is not just for the sake of representation, but also to ensure that we present sector-specific factors in the study.

We have chosen to study projects that ended recently in order to include experience from planning to completion. However, this has limited our selection. Table 2 presents the Swedish-coordinated projects that had final reports in the spring of 2016. We included both the finished projects from the higher education sector. Adult education also presented final reports for two projects, but the coordinator of one project was no longer employed within the organisation, so we did not include it in the study. For vocational education and training and schools we made a random selection of three projects from each sector. In the school sector there are two types of projects with slightly different conditions: *Strategic Partnerships for Schools Only* and *Strategic Partnerships for School Education*. Among the projects that presented final reports in the autumn of 2016 there were only projects within *Strategic Partnerships for Schools Only*. We wish to state that it would have been desirable to include some projects from *Strategic Partnerships for School Education* in our study, because these have more similarities with projects in the other sectors.

Table 2. Swedish-coordinated projects in Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships that finished in 2016.

| Sector | No. that ended in 2016 | No. included in the study |
|---|---|---|
| Higher education | 2 | 2 |
| Adult education | 2 | 1 |
| Vocational education and training | 4 | 3 |
| Strategic Partnerships for School Education | 0 | 0 |
| Strategic Partnerships for School Education | 10 | 3 |

# Written sources of information

We have used final reports and the project's final letter that UHR sends to coordinators when the final report is reviewed to obtain basic information about the projects. The coordinator writes the final report using an online form with set headings and instructions to describe the project's implementation, management and dissemination of results. There are also more detailed instructions for describing any problems experienced by the project and how they were managed.

The final letter to the project has two sections, one with information about payment of the project's remaining funding and one with the evaluation of the final report. An external expert commissioned by UHR prepares this evaluation, which is the basis for UHR's decision. The evaluation is conducted using four set criteria (see Table 1).

We have read final reports and the evaluations of the final reports to prepare for interviews with coordinators and external experts. Prior to interviewing the coordinators, we have particularly noted details relevant to knowledge development, project governance and result dissemination.

# Interviews with coordinators

Interviews with coordinators (**Appendix 1**) were conducted using set questions (**Appendix 2**). The formulation of the questions in the individual interview situation has varied because we strived to make links to the final report and the final report's evaluation.

In some cases, more than one representative from the coordinator's organisation has participated, with several people informally sharing responsibility for the project. We have interviewed twelve people for a total of nine projects. (names are provided in **Appendix 1**). In most cases, interviews were done over the telephone (5), as well as via video calls (1), or on site in the coordinating organisation's premises (4). Interview durations varied between 60 and 90 minutes.

## Interviews with external experts

At the time of the survey, 18 strategic partnership projects had been completed and had their final reports evaluated. When the interviews took place, four external experts had also evaluated final reports and the other interviewed experts had evaluated project applications. Several of the experts have a great deal of experience of evaluating project applications and final reports, including the programme prior to Erasmus+, the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP). Among the six external experts we interviewed, several have evaluated applications and final reports in multiple sectors. All the sectors administered by UHR (schools, vocational education and training, adult education and higher education) are represented in the experts' areas of expertise. The interviews were conducted over the telephone and lasted for just over an hour. Interview questions for external experts are in **Appendix 3**.

## Swedish and Norwegian perspectives

During both the planning and execution of this study, UHR has cooperated with the equivalent government agency in Norway, the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education (SIU)[1]. SIU is the Norwegian NA office and administers EU programmes in the field of education. In 2016, SIU conducted a quantitative survey of Norwegian participation in Strategic Partnerships[2]. With the survey as a basis, a qualitative analysis of a selection of Norwegian-coordinated partnership projects was conducted during 2017. The Norwegian study was primarily based on interviews with coordinators, but they also interviewed Norwegian project partners without a coordinating function. SIU has not utilised the opportunity to interview external experts.

The reports' authors at UHR and SIU were in continual contact while working on the surveys. Cooperation has primarily applied to a shared study design and exchanging experiences while work was underway. Cooperation with SIU has provided a broader perspective on project partnerships with Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships and given us the opportunity to preliminarily compare results, even if the Norwegian study had not been completed when the Swedish report was written. We have included comparisons that were possible to make in the text.

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1. www.siu.no
2. www.siu.no/publikasjoner/Alle-publikasjoner/siu-report-series-05-2016-erasmus-strategic-partnerships

# Results

## Working as a coordinator

### Coordinators have previous experience

Only one of the projects in the study was coordinated by a person who had not previously worked as a coordinator for an international project. However, that coordinator had taken over responsibility from a former coordinator who had a great deal of experience of project management for partnerships that involve several countries. The other projects in the study were initiated and coordinated by people with substantial experience of leading international projects. The many years of experience primarily applies to people working as project managers in administration for the education provider's contractor. One coordinator has worked full-time with the administration of EU projects since Sweden joined the EU in 1995.

### Individual commitment drives the project forward

When encouraged to describe the initiative behind the project, coordinators in both Sweden and Norway emphasise a purely personal commitment to the project's topic and objectives. A sense of wanting to create lasting improvements is striking among almost all the coordinators we interviewed. Others highlight strategic interest from their own organisation, or combine these two as reasons for initiating the project.

Everyone agreed that support from their organisation's management is important. Some people are satisfied, but several were also unhappy with the level of commitment from the management and the absence of administrative support. This is particularly applicable to representatives from the school sector who were more likely to highlight lukewarm interest from their school management.

### Dedicated project management time varies greatly

Of the nine projects included in the study, four were coordinated by someone who works in a form of central administration that is a contractor for several education providers. This could be a municipality, county council or an adult education association. It may often be a good choice for the project to appoint an administrator as coordinator. A person in such a position is often used to project management for international development projects and is part of an administrative environment where there are colleagues with expertise in finance and administration. This is also a person who has time in their job to work on the project. Having a coordinator at the contractor may also make it easier to involve several schools in the contractor's area (e.g. the municipality), or disseminating the results to numerous schools. The potential disadvantage with a central coordinator is that they do not always have daily contacts with pupils and teachers.

Of the projects included in our study, the projects in adult education and vocational education and training have chosen to have a coordinator at the contractor. The school projects have not had that opportunity because they were all granted projects in the programme area of *Strategic Partnerships for Schools Only.* In higher education, the concept of contractor is not relevant because they are independent authorities and are thus their own contractors. They could possibly choose a coordinator at the HEI's central administration or one at a faculty office, but this is a staff resource that is not always available. In the two higher education projects in this study, activities are also subject-specific so that they clearly belong to a department. It is often natural for the coordinator to be a lecturer and researcher at the relevant department. University lecturers are also usually expected to coordinate large research projects.

## Competition with other tasks for teachers

We interviewed six coordinators who were also teachers in schools or upper-secondary schools. The decisive question is that of the working hours they have dedicated to the project. None of these six teachers did get any reduction in their teaching load to have time to coordinate the project. At one school, coordinators were not expected to fully participate in additional activities such as the school's environment group. At another school, the coordinators received a few hours' overtime compensation when the project had finished. SIU's study also highlights the issue of the time required to be a project coordinator. A lack of time appears to be a recurring problem for the projects interviewed in the schools sector.

All six coordinators in the school sector have talked to their school management about reductions to normal teaching hours. However, that was not easy to fix. In one case, the school employed a temporary teacher to cover teaching when the coordinator was travelling with the project. But because the coordinator had to plan the temporary teacher's lessons,, in practice, it was of limited help. The school management also offered that coordinator a reduction in teaching hours by handing over a year nine class to another teacher, but the coordinator chose not to accept the offer due to a strong feeling of responsibility for his or her pupils. It felt unfair to hand over a class they had had for two years prior to its final year.

## HEIs have more flexible teaching staffing

Higher education teaching staff did not mention anything about the competition for time that was experienced by school teachers, but this is probably due to a different work situation. HEIs use the project budget for administration to release working hours that would otherwise have been used by the lecturer for teaching, equivalent to how HEIs have routines for reductions in teaching hours when lecturers receive research funding.

HEIs are different in this context because they have established routines for making rapid changes to teaching staffing when lecturers are otherwise engaged. HEIs that are particularly research-focused always have excess teaching staff to allow cover for lecturers who are otherwise occupied with

external projects. The equivalent preparedness and established routines are probably only rarely found in other education sectors.

### Challenges in the leadership role

Work as a coordinator not only involves coordination and administration. The coordinator is usually expected to be the person who leads meetings and has ideas about the way forward for the project. This is not always a role for which the coordinator is prepared. One coordinator talked about the difficulties of being treated as a leader and getting the respect and attention that is necessary to be able to lead in a good way. This may be due to cultural differences, male and female, and representation at different professional levels. A coordinator and leader who is young, female, or a teacher often has a more difficult experience when a partner sends representatives that are older men to meetings, who might even be head teachers. The coordinator who talked about these difficulties had learned that in the next project it would be better to make more decisions prior to meetings, leaving fewer decisions for consensus discussions.

Another coordinator talked about the imbalances that arise due to representation at different professional levels. When some partners sent a head teacher to planning meetings, this person also took with them their position and the hierarchical structure they are accustomed to from their home environment. In cases such as this, cultural clashes are probably greater than if the meeting only included teachers.

Another coordinator was self-critical for not understanding quickly enough that work distributed to partners had, in some cases, come to a halt. Some parties were not working in the way the project had decided and this did not become apparent until the project's halfway summary. The coordinator for this project thought that more and shorter meetings via a video link would have been better than the few physical meetings that had taken place at some of the parties.

# Developing through partnership

In interviews, when we talk about developing through partnership, many people highlight the importance of personal meetings. For many people, getting to know people whose culture and daily life can be surprisingly different to their own provides the most lasting impression. This is important for teaching staff, and equally important for students who have even more limited international experience. Personal encounters not only include the development of intercultural understanding and knowledge of a European place and people. It also includes elements that do not have a direct bearing on the project, which arise though conversations and visits to each other's work environments. This can be important. One coordinator mentioned the design of chemistry labs as one example of an important side-line for the partnership.

## Cooperation across national borders creates new knowledge

All the interviewees describe international cooperation as extremely important and vital to the partnership. Partners with different knowledge and perspectives, and experiences from their countries, have in some cases been essential to the partnership's knowledge acquisition. In other cases, individual partners with unique competences have been gathered in the same partnership, competences that are difficult to find in a single country. Five of the interviewed projects aimed to develop improved routines, recommendations or practical manuals for work on an issue. Because the aim has been to make these as generally applicable as possible, international representation has been decisive in including aspects that may vary from country to country.

The partnerships have also utilised their international representation to disseminate results. One partnership started its work by making a communication plan in which each partner performed a simple analysis and listed its country's stakeholders potentially interested in the project's results. The coordinator highlights this stage as important. Partly to initially establish the target group for communication, partly to involve all parties in the communicative work and disseminate the results more widely than an organisation is normally capable of.

The coordinators and project participants interviewed by SIU are also positive to international cooperation. However, several of the interviewees emphasise the intercultural experience more than the subject-specific, professional or organisational development that the project intended to promote. Considering ambitions of Erasmus+ to contribute to innovation and development in the field of education, this is worth deeper discussion.

## Little time to disseminate results in a two-year project

In the experts' reviews of the nine projects' final reports, two received praise for making the material they produced available on the project's website. One project receives praise for planning the dissemination of results well in advance, distributing the work among all parties and using several different methods and channels for dissemination. As for the other projects' dissemination of results, the experts see some problems. Criticisms in the evaluation of final reports are usually about planned activities and dissemination channels that were not implemented. Dissemination conferences were cancelled due to too few registrations or the planned Facebook page was never started.

We encouraged the coordinators at the interviews to talk about how dissemination of results worked and how work related to the original plan. Almost everyone talked about how dissemination efforts did not work well, and they present it as if it was more or less what they expected. A couple of coordinators do express disappointment in the communicative activities, in one case because interest in the conference was so poor that they cancelled, an in another because work on dissemination was too unevenly spread throughout the partnership.

## Different opinions on dissemination

In general, there is often a discrepancy between the experts' and the coordinators' opinions about whether the partnership succeeded with dissemination. The presentation of dissemination activities can sometimes be inadequate in the final reports. However, it is equally probable that dissemination has actually not functioned well. Gathering enough participants to a seminar or conference organised by the partnership is a well-known difficulty. In a project period that is limited to two years, there is also a lack of time for both producing results and disseminating them. One external expert talked about how some higher education projects that primarily disseminate project results to other researchers and not to the actual target group addressed by the project's topic.

SIU's study also indicates that the challenge for partnerships is in continuing to disseminate results after the project's final report and the termination of funding. Contacts with, and relevance for, the intended users of the project's intellectual output are also covered in the Norwegian study. What does the project regard as valuable to disseminate: do they primarily convey project activities, or results and experiences that can be transferred to others? Some project webpages and manuals have probably not reached the intended users.

## Diverse organisation types broaden the results

Of the nine projects included in this study, three have had project partners that are not education providers. These partners of another organisational type are one research group, one group of regions and, finally, interest groups.

The project that cooperated with the research group is extremely pleased with obtaining a high level of knowledge in the project. Not least, the research group had a good international overview of ideas that had already been tested and possibly rejected in the project's area of work. The researchers were also pleased to have, through the partnership, access to student groups from several countries to test their theories in practice. The research group also had an entirely different capacity for documenting the project and getting the results out to the research community, which would have been difficult for the schools to do on their own.

The group of regions that participated in one of the projects was initially a context in which the parties had got to know each other and where the idea for the project had arisen. It was thus natural to invite the network organisations into the application. The project made good use of the network organisations, primarily for disseminating the results. The network has members and a geographic spread throughout Europe, as well as established communication channels to its members.

The project that cooperated with two (similar) national interest groups was more hesitant about the benefit of having them in the partnership. After a while, it became increasingly apparent that the interest groups had other starting points than those of the project and nor did they share the other parties' overview of educational issues. However, the differences in agenda do

not appear to have led to any real conflicts. The interest groups themselves chose to assume a low profile in the project.

## Choosing the right partner is important

The external experts generally saw two different bases for the choice of partner. The planned cooperation is either based on having shared interests and/ or problems, or was primarily based on the parties knowing each other. One expert highlighted a potential problem with cooperation with organisations and people who are previously known: some project applications build upon a partnership between similar organisations that all work with the same issues, but without clear contacts with the intended user of the project's results. One expert talked about several cases in which project applications had had points deducted because the plan for dissemination of project results to final users of the potential project was not stated in the application.

One of the quality criteria for the project application is that the parties should complement each other. Experts who evaluated school projects state that this is difficult to achieve in projects that are awarded in the programme area *partnership between schools only*. The Norwegian study also confirms that the choice of partners in school-only partnerships does not always appear to be strategically considered. Several of the school projects state that they have been contacted though eTwinning[3], for example, or that the partnership is based on previous knowledge of each other.

## Uncertainty about representation from different countries

When we bring up the issue of the partnership's representation from difficult countries in the interviews, several experts say that they are uncertain whether this is an assessment criterion. Previously there was a clear desire for EU-funded partnerships to be comprised of organisations from countries from north and south, east and west in Europe. The same experts who questioned geographic representation as an evaluation criterion, said that they had a feeling that applying partnerships now have a narrower national representation than previously. In the bounds of this evaluation, we do not have the opportunity to confirm changes to the partnerships' geographical spread, but we feel it is probably the case. The EU's new development strategy, EU2020, has reduced the priority of European integration (thus giving less importance to geographic spread) and instead emphasises the growth and modernisation of the education sector.

One expert, who previously evaluated major vocational education projects called *Transfer of Innovation* in the Lifelong Learning Programme, sees an ambiguity in a number of project applications in their description of how the project will benefit from the representation of several countries. Sometimes, the gains from the project being based on European cooperation remain unclear. External experts also see a development towards project applications in higher education being for partnerships between countries with more similar education systems. It is not as clear that a project would con-

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3.  www.utbyten.se/samarbete-och-utbyte/webbplatser-och-verktyg/etwinning/

tribute new perspectives through cooperation in the partnership as it is in a partnership with a greater diversion of countries and organisations.

Experts point out project applications with several partners from the same country as problematic, as it is difficult maintain that the parties complement each other. One of the experts states that there are project applications in which the consortium consists of only Nordic partners. Because Erasmus+ is a programme that builds upon European cooperation, the experts see this as a problem in the application unless there is a clear motivation for what the various partner organisations add to the project and how the project's topic is relevant to each of the parties.

# The importance of a needs analysis in the application

The interviews with experts gave a unanimous picture of the most common problems with the application documents. One is the lack of a clear needs analysis: why is this relevant and important to our organisation or, with a wider perspective, to develop the education sector?

One of the experts linked the lack of a needs analysis in the applications to a lack of knowledge about, or understanding of, a logical programme structure in which actions can be traced back to needs. If the desired results and effects of a project are identified, it is easier to assess which activities have led there. One way of making it easier for applicants could be do provide simple and logical programme templates as support.

A project application should also state which of the programme's priorities the project relates to. One recurring tendency highlighted by several experts is that the applicant states a priority that is politically prioritised at the time of application. However, in the application it is not clear how that priority will be worked with.

### Show that the partnership is important for the project's implementation

Difficulties describing how work would be done are, according to several external experts, a recurring problem in the applications. Why is the partnership important, could things be done equally well by only one organisation? What does each party contribute to the work? One expert talked about one project application in which the Swedish coordinator is responsible for eighty per cent of the *intellectual outputs.* Cooperation in the partnership does not appear important in this case.

Several experienced experts state that project applications that display difficulties in clearly describing the planned project can still lead to good projects that give results. The opposite also occurs: a well-written project application is no guarantee that the project will provide concrete results.

### Many misunderstandings about specific concepts

According to several of the interviewed external experts, it is common for applicants to have problems interpreting the terminology and language in

the instructions and application form. The experts provide several examples of apparent misinterpretations of terminology. Projects often confuse *intellectual outputs* with *activities*. For example, instead of describing a course that the project developed, they describe the process of developing the course. Another common misunderstanding is that the project results are confused with the project's internal newsletter or websites for dissemination of results. To make it easier for project applicants, several of the experts see a need for clearer definitions of concepts used in application forms and instructions. Increased clarity would possibly also reduce the risk of missing offered opportunities. For example, there are projects aimed at students with disabilities that do not use the opportunity to apply for special funding for these students.

## Creating something of importance

A project must create something lasting to be really successful, something that remains after the project and which will benefit more people outside the partnership. Clear examples of success in this regard include a project that started and continued to run a Master's course in which each contributes lecturers and students for the shared course, and a project that initiated and environment week in the municipality that now involves many people outside the school and which has become a lasting tradition. A third project has developed opportunities for distance studies for a technical foundation year. These three examples are activities that will continue after the Erasmus+ funding.

For projects that aimed to produce new knowledge or improved routines, it is more difficult to produce evidence of their impact. These projects have documented their proposals in the form of websites and films or downloadable instructions. They have often tried to publicise their results via seminars or marketing. Here, in an interview situation, it is more difficult for the coordinator to assess how their results will have a lasting value, for example the way they will be disseminated and used by others.

When we ask the coordinators about lasting results, a couple of them highlight their own and participating students' development. They are probably right in that the participants are satisfied, but they do not fulfil the programme objectives for sharing with others. It is clear that the projects are least successful with dissemination and impact are those that had low ambitions in this area from the beginning.

### Difficulties describing
### the project's contribution to development

One quality criterion for the strategic partnerships is that projects are innovative or supplement already implemented project cooperation. In many cases, describing the way in which the project is innovative is difficult, particularly for smaller projects that often deal with the exchange of experience.

To demonstrate in the final report how a project has driven development, it is almost necessary that the results relate to the situation prior to the pro-

ject's initiation. A couple of experts state that the partnerships do not often know the current state of knowledge in their field and therefore cannot put their projects in a context. They would greatly benefit from surveying the literature and research and from current practice in the area addressed by the project. For example, there are formulations such as the project being "educationally revolutionary" even though the same methods are already used somewhere else. Experts who have experience of evaluating projects in both the school and higher education sectors state that applicants from higher education are often better at putting the problems the project will address in a context.

A number of experts felt that assessing the project's results and effects is even more difficult because implementation of the results often happens after the project has submitted its final report. For example, projects that develop courses have not run the course yet when the project ends. The course is a result of the project, but the expected effect can only be studied when the course has been completed, preferably more than once.

## Finance: covering the partnership's costs

We asked the coordinators during interviews to describe the administration of project funding. They were also able to freely reason about what the project would have been able to do with a larger or freer budget. Because almost all of them were used to the financial management of projects that preceded Erasmus+, the conversations also covered the greatest financial differences from previous programme: the introduction of lump sums and unit costs. Projects are now allocated money based on the number of trips they make, for example, not the actual costs. All those who commented on the lump sums and unit costs agreed that they were a significant simplification in terms of administration, but most people also stated that some unit costs were not generous enough. In particular, the coverage for longer trips within Europe are inadequate. This applies both to trips associated with meetings and with multiplier events. One highly appreciated simplification is those who cooperate with countries that (in comparison to Europe) have a significantly different financial accounting system. These interim accounts no longer need to me submitted, which is a great relief.

During interviews with external experts, a couple of them have requested that the writing workshops UHR organises for potential project applicants should have a greater focus on budget issues. Calculating a realistic project budget is demanding, especially for project coordinators with little experience. Another worry seems to be the difficulty in making retroactive changes to budgets. One project unintentionally located all travel costs with one partner, even though they would all have expenses for this. This became surprisingly difficult and something that the project never managed to correct, despite numerous contacts with the NA offices in Sweden and the partner's country. The uneven allocation of travel costs was simply something the project had to live with and all the partners except one had to use money from outside the project budget for their trips.

When asked what the project would have done with more money, no one responded they would have done something radically different. They would have done more of the same, taken more participants or located more costs in the project's budget – costs that were now paid for by other cost centres in the organisation.

One coordinator felt the unit costs for national dissemination of results are inadequate and would have wanted to use more money for that. They would have preferred to do something bigger for their dissemination conference and perhaps locate it in Stockholm. Due to a lack of funds, the meeting was instead held at a school in their home municipality. Another coordinator said that they would have liked to use money for purchasing translation services, which the coordinator did not think was possible. Other coordinator said with a larger budget the project would have liked to have an evaluator linked to the project, an "accompanying researcher", who made continual evaluation and could thus participate in the project's learning processes. It should be noted that there are opportunities for projects to pay for both translation and evaluators, but these must be stated in the application as *Exceptional costs*.

# Administering a project

## Contact with UHR mostly a positive experience

All the coordinators have had personal contact with officers at UHR. The officers receive a great deal of praise for their accessibility, helpfulness and expertise. When they are unsure, they find out the answer and get back to the person making the enquiry. One coordinator says that they also forwarded questions from foreign partners so they were able to get answers from UHR, rather than from the NA office in the partner's country.

However, three coordinators complained that the officers changed frequently. During the two-year project period they had had three different officers. It is a disadvantage when the new officer has not been with the project from the start and so does not know about the project's history and any problems.

## Writing a final report is not very demanding

As part of the interview, coordinators were encouraged to talk freely about how they had written their final reports. Few described the work as difficult. One said that it was stressful in the end because work on the final report coincided with other activities. Otherwise there was only one project that perceived the reporting as disproportionately demanding. This positive attitude may be due to almost all the coordinators being experienced at leading externally financed projects. They had all done this type of reporting previously and Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships is probably no more demanding than previous forms of financing. Many instead praised the simplifications in the new programme and how the form was available online early on. Several coordinators said that had entered their reporting in the form while the project was running, long before the project was in its final phase.

**Thoughts about the evaluation of the final reports**

UHR's evaluation of the final report is sent to the project with the final letter (see more below the heading *From final report to the project's final letter*). The maximum total is 100 points and a project that receives a score above 75 is considered praiseworthy and gets the title of *good practice*. Out of the projects included in our study, only one achieved higher than 75 points. Six of the nine projects had scores below 60 and one was below 50 points. A score of less than 50 is serious for the project, because it entails a clearly substandard grade, as well as a retroactive 25 per cent deduction in the awarded funding.

Two of the coordinators said they did not place any value on the evaluation, one had not read it and another questioned why the evaluation process awards points. Not unexpectedly, coordinators whose projects had received low scores were more questioning about the evaluation. Several of these felt misunderstood.

One of the coordinators who felt misunderstood talked about the seminar that UHR had held with coordinators prior to work on the final reports. During the seminar, a UHR representative encouraged the projects to be open about any difficulties they had faced and how one of the purposes of the reporting was to learn together and share our experiences. The coordinator responded to this encouragement and wrote about the project's problems in the final report. In the evaluation, the project is criticised for these failures and the coordinator clearly believes that this caused the deduction in points.

One final letter states that the coordinating organisation is so experienced in international development projects that they should have performed better than they did. This was something that the relevant coordinator took up during the interview and wondered whether the organisation should really be evaluated based on its potential instead of on what the project has achieved. Placing extra high demands on an experienced coordination organisation is in line with what is stated in the handbook for Erasmus+[4]: "The quality assessment of the project application will be proportional to the objectives of the cooperation and the nature of the organisations involved." The above quote is about the evaluation of applications, but because it is part of the mission statement for Strategic Partnerships we presume that it applies for evaluation in general, and thus also final reports. There is probably a need for increased clarity in the instructions to both applicants and evaluators.

**Why points?**

One of the coordinators questions why final reports are given points in the evaluation. It is understandable that points are used in the evaluation of applications because they are ranked as part of competing for funding. However, the equivalent does not apply to final reports, for which the primary purpose of the evaluation is to identify the projects that have not achieved an approved result and thus have their budgets cut.

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4.   Erasmus+ Programme Guide www.erasmusplus.si/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/erasmus-plus-programme-guide_en_-version-2-of-07-01-2016.pdf

# Evaluation of applications and final reports

One of the interviewed external experts participated in evaluation work a few years back when it was common to all countries and administered by the European Commission. That work included a defined scale for evaluating final reports, which the expert thought was good. It is now considerably more difficult: the quality criteria must be scored according to a given system, but what, for example, does 25 points represent? There may be room here for varying interpretations, which may also differ internationally and nationally. In the evaluation of centralised projects during previous programme periods, evaluators also had access to communication that had occurred between the administrative authority (EACEA) and the project owner during the project. Via this, the evaluators had access to information about any changes to the project's circumstances, etc., which could be taken into consideration when evaluating the final result.

A couple of the experts emphasise that they value the Nordic cooperation on the evaluation activities that took place in the first applications round in Erasmus+. Evaluating applications from different countries, and discussing evaluation criteria with Nordic colleagues has developed their own evaluation expertise. Seeing the differences in evaluation in different countries was a basis for discussion and ideas about how to score applications and project reports. Within the framework of the Nordic evaluation training, the participants also saw examples of scoring for applications in other European countries, which also gave a reason for reflection on the evaluation criteria and the interpretations of them.

Several of the experts state the benefit of having the opportunity to discuss the evaluation process and criteria with colleagues. Previously, evaluations of projects in higher education were done in Stockholm, concentrated over a few days. All the external experts met up and could compare and discuss the evaluations. The experts now work at a distance and communication with other experts is via email.

When we asked the experts to comment on the spread of project results, a recurring answer was that the quality criterion on impact and dissemination has too great a proportion of the evaluation points (30 points of 100). Through funding from Erasmus+, the project has funding until the project is completed, ideally while the dissemination of results continues after the project's final report has been written.

Answers vary on the question of whether the information available to external experts is adequate. For example, it is difficult to assess whether a project is innovative in cases where a consortium has previously cooperated in the same problem area. An external expert would in such cases need to have access to more information on the results of previous cooperation; on the other hand, the time for evaluation is limited.

In general, the experts are satisfied with the feedback from officers at UHR. However, several of them emphasise how continual competence development is also important for experienced experts.

# Partnerships in a longer perspective

Of the nine partnerships that are included in our study, only two are new; new in that they had not previously cooperated in project form med external funding. The other seven built upon previous cooperation with the same group of partners (5) or a minor change to the group of partners (2). They had previously had external funding from Nordplus and Nordplus Junior, or from the European Commission programme that preceded Erasmus+.

Most partnerships also intend subsequent continuation. Three partnerships already have external funding arranged for their continuation, three are applying and one of the Swedish schools is continuing its cooperation with its foreign partner without external funding. Only two of the partnerships consider their cooperation to have concluded with the final report to Erasmus+.

Partnerships lasting longer than the two year of Erasmus+ funding is in many ways a positive thing. It shows commitment and that they are adequately viable to find other funding. This is not just a good signal; if there are relatively few organisations that that continually recur in the list of awarded projects, it also means that the majority of schools and other organisations rarely or never participate. That statement gives rise to some obvious questions:

- What happens at all the education providers and other organisations that do not have external funding for international projects – do they work with internationalisation but without needing external funding for it?
- Could it be that they apply, but that it is too difficult for a coordinator with no previous experience of international project management to be competitive when awarding financing from Strategic Partnerships?

To be able to reason well about the above issues, better knowledge is required about the project applications that are not granted funding, and preferably better knowledge of the great number who never apply as well.

# Conclusions

### ...that relate to the application and project implementation

There are many benefits to widening the partnership to include partners from multiple educations sectors or several types of organisations. Teacher trainers, researchers, branch organisations and interest groups often have the opportunity to broaden perspectives and facilitate additions paths for the dissemination of project results. Additionally, a partnership that consists of parties that complement rather than duplicate each other is a great competitive advantage when applications are evaluated.

Coordinating a project within Erasmus+ is both challenging and enjoyable, but calculations must include the amount of time and commitment that is required. Therefore, every organisation that takes on the role of coordinator should also have a plan for how the coordinator should be released from some of their regular work tasks. The organisation should also think about other support that the project may need, such as financial administration.

Dissemination of the project's results is greatly emphasised in Erasmus+. Make sure there is a thorough plan for how this will be done, even at the application stage, work continually on communication during the project and make sure that all parties are involved in this necessary task.

Thoroughly document the allocation of tasks in the partnership. Follow-up what needs to be done frequently. More small-scale contacts or short meetings are often better than fewer, bigger ones.

### ...that relate to evaluation activities

Erasmus+ has numerous specific concepts that are fundamental to understanding the programme's intentions. The correct interpretation of their significance is also vital to the person applying, evaluating, or who is otherwise involved in the programme. When we read applications and final reports we saw that the interpretation of some concepts is significantly different. There is apparently great uncertainty about words such as *relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact* and *intellectual output*. These concepts need to be clarified in a simple manner for applicants, coordinators of awarded projects and, not least, external experts.

In our conversations, experts have talked about their uncertainty regarding some routines. In some cases, we can also see that they interpret their tasks somewhat differently. For example, one expert has ensured the evaluation is limited to the information presented in the final report, while another has wanted to evaluate the project responsible for the report. Is it the project or the report that is given points? A number of experts also testify to the difficulty of adjusting the points to an appropriate level. What does 75 points mean, is it good or just okay? Sshould projects be rewarded for being open about difficulties they faced or should points be deducted for each fault in their planning? These are questions with no obvious answers.

After the 2014 Call, experts for applications from the higher education sector met at physical meetings at which they read and discussed the applications. This was a popular working method. When, as now, all evaluative work is conducted remotely, there is a risk that evaluations are less compatible and more dependent on individual interpretation. The process may also be less interesting for participants, which can ultimately reduce the attractiveness of working as an expert.

## ...that relate to marketing the programme

Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships are open for applications from a wide range of organisation types and there are huge numbers that could apply. Despite this, the group of applicants is fairly limited and, when they apply, it is primarily established partnerships and organisations with experience of project management that have their projects approved. Widening participation in the programme should therefore be a special focus. This should be done by increasing knowledge of what the programme offers, partly in the form of practical help to first-time applicants.

One of the most important conclusions of this study is that working conditions for coordinators vary significantly. Those who find fulfilling their tasks as coordinator most difficult are those who are also working as teachers. UHR can make a difference here by drawing attention to this difficulty and how the organisation that is considering applying for project funding should prepare for the role of coordinator. These preparations should primarily involve the allocation of staff resources, both within the project and in the form of financial administration. The opportunities to use the project's budget for administration should be part of this information. There is certainly the potential to use good examples, such as schools that have been able to organise staffing so that the coordinator was able to perform well as part of their job and where supporting resources have been made available to the coordinator.

The variation in working conditions for coordinators between sectors is one argument for focusing marketing efforts on one education sector at a time. This is because the challenges are different from sector to sector.

# Appendix 1

**Interviewed coordinators**

Claes Peter Hellwig, Stockholm University of the Arts
Ilona Novak, Västernorrland County Council
Patrik Roddar, Johanna Rasmussen and Karolina Nylund, Hersby upper-secondary school
Ingmarie Rohdin, Folkuniversitetet
Irmy Schweiger, Stockholm University
Klas Tallvid, HälsingeUtbildning
Eva Wallerström and Carl Johan Evers, Rudbecksskolan
Karin Wigert, Källängen school
Pernilla Öhberg, Kungsbacka Municipality

**Interviewed external experts**

Margareta Ivarsson
Gregory Neely
Jesper Jönsson
Anders Duvkär
Ingemar Svensson
Olof Nilsson

# Appendix 2

**Interview questions for coordinators,
Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships**

1. How was the group of partners created? Did you know each other prior to the application process?
2. Is the initiative behind the partnership linked to any strategic investments at the organisation/department (development targets, internationalisation objectives, external sources of funding)?
3. If yes, has that link been important for the support you have received from your employer as coordinator?
4. The size of the partnership. Did you have the right number of parties?
5. It what way has additional value been created by having partners from multiple countries?
6. How has added value been created by including different types of organisations?
7. In addition to the above two questions, were there other benefits or difficulties with the international cooperation that you would like to talk about?
8. Budget – how would you have reallocated the budget if you had had the chance?
9. What other things would the project have done with a bigger (or freer) budget?
10. How has the project contributed to increased (new) knowledge at individual and organisational levels?
11. How has work changed during the project?
12. Has the project made any changes to priorities or topics after they were described in the application? Describe the changes.
13. Will you take a different approach if you coordinate a similar project in the future?
14. How has the dissemination of the results worked in relation to what you planned?
15. The future of the project issues. How has the project created something that will hopefully be lasting?
16. The opportunities for the project's continuation, possibly with a new partner?
17. Describe your contacts with the programme administration at UHR.
18. Describe your work and that of the partnership on final reporting.
19. Have you received a fair evaluation of the final report?
20. How does project cooperation work in Erasmus+ compared to the programme's predecessor?
21. Is there anything you expected we would talk about that has not come up in our conversation?

# Appendix 3

**Interview questions for external experts
in the evaluation of applications and final reports**

1. What characterises a successful project application?
2. What are common reasons for the failure of a project application?
3. How do applicants motivate the composition of the project consortium?
4. Is there a clear motivation for the choice of project partner?
5. To what extent is there an emphasis on the complementarity of the organisations in the project?
6. What do you think about the points distribution between the quality criteria for the application/final report?
7. Are dissemination activities described in the application/final report after the project has submitted its final report?
8. What are your reflections on how the project describes the dissemination of the project's results?
9. Is the information you receive as an expert adequate for evaluating the quality of the application/final report according to the criteria provided?
10. What do you think about working as an external expert?
11. How can evaluation work be improved?

## Education, exchange, enrichment – helping you take the next step

The Swedish Council for Higher Education is a government agency tasked with providing support to the education sector through a number of various activities. The council is located in Stockholm and Visby.

UHR's activities include:
- coordinating admission to higher education,
- facilitating international exchanges,
- providing information and support to those interested in studying at the higher education level,
- managing and developing IT systems,
- recognising and evaluating foreign educational qualifications,
- widening participation and preventing discrimination in higher education,
- producing the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test (Högskoleprovet).

**Swedish Council for Higher Education**