Virtual Exchanges in higher education and youth

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Virtual exchanges projects consist of online people-to-people activities that promote intercultural dialogue and soft skills development. They make it possible for every young person to access high-quality international and cross-cultural education (both formal and non-formal) without physical mobility. While virtual debating or training does not fully replace the benefits of physical mobility, participants in virtual exchanges ought to reap some of the benefits of international educational experiences. Digital platforms represent a valuable tool in partially answering the global constraints on mobility caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual exchanges also help spreading European values. Moreover, in some cases they can prepare, deepen and extend physical exchanges, as well as fuel new demand for them.

Virtual exchanges take place in small groups and are always moderated by a trained facilitator. They should be easily integrated into youth (non-formal education) projects or higher education courses. Virtual exchanges can draw participants from both sectors, even if, depending on specific projects, they could involve participants from either only one of them or from both. All projects under this call will involve organisations and participants coming from both EU Member States and third countries associated to the Programme, and third countries not associated to the Programme.

Objectives of the Action

The action will aim at:

- encouraging intercultural dialogue with third countries not associated to the Programme and increasing tolerance through online people-to-people interactions, building on digital, youth-friendly technologies;
- promoting various types of virtual exchanges as a complement to Erasmus+ physical mobility, allowing more young people to benefit from intercultural and international experience;
- Enhancing critical thinking and media literacy, particularly in the use of internet and social media, such as to counter discrimination, indoctrination, polarization and violent radicalisation;
- fostering the digital and soft skills[1] development of students, young people and youth

workers[2] , including the practice of foreign languages and teamwork, notably to enhance employability;
- promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education;
- strengthening the youth dimension in the relations of the EU with third countries.

Thematic Areas / Specific Objectives

The Erasmus+ Virtual Exchanges are a bottom-up initiative. In this call, participating organisations are free to choose the topics on which they will focus, but proposals ought to convincingly demonstrate their expected impact in relation to one or more of the above-mentioned objectives (see also 'Expected impact' section below). Gender aspects should be taken into account as needed, depending on the projects' scope and themes (e.g. by introducing gender sensitivity aspects in the trainings). Special attention needs to be given to the inclusion of socially and economically vulnerable people and persons unable to apply for physical mobility. Since virtual exchanges are easier to organise with students and universities, applicants are encouraged to involve young people and organisations not enrolled in higher education.

Activities

Projects will be funded based on work plans that may integrate a wide range of online cooperation activities, including for example:

- online-facilitated discussions between young people of youth organisations based in different countries, as part of youth projects. They could include role playing simulations;
- training for youth workers willing to develop a virtual exchange project with colleagues from other countries;
- online facilitated discussions between students of Higher Education institutions based in different countries, as part of higher education degrees;
- training for university professors/staff willing to develop a virtual exchange project with colleagues from other countries;
- interactive open online courses including traditional course materials such as filmed lectures, readings, and problem sets (like the well-known MOOCs, Massive Open Online Courses, but putting an emphasis on interactive user forums in small groups to support community interactions among students, professors, teaching assistants, young people and youth workers).

Setting up a project

All virtual exchange projects need to be:

- moderated by trained facilitators;
- secure and protective from the perspective of participants and hosts, in full compliance of the EU data protection rules[3] ;
- politically sound and culturally relevant: virtual exchange activities must be firmly embedded in the youth and higher education sectors and be up to date with young people's online and offline cultures in the participating countries;
- open and accessible at user experience and interaction level. Registration and interactions with peers, facilitators, administrators, and other stakeholders should be straightforward and easy;
- mainly synchronously, with possible asynchronous components (e.g. readings, videos).

Participant organisations must arrange virtual exchanges for people in the 13-30 age range. If a project involves people under 18, participating organisations are required to obtain prior authorisation for participation from their parents or those acting on their behalf. Individual participants must be based in the countries of the organisations participating in the project.

In order to carry out their activities, projects should rely, as far as possible, on existing tools and platforms. Should there be a need to develop new tools or platforms for specific projects, this would have to be properly justified.

Which are the criteria to be met to apply for Virtual Exchanges in higher education and youth projects?

Eligibility criteria

In order to be eligible for an Erasmus+ grant, project proposals for Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education and Youth must comply with the following criteria:

Who can apply?

The following organisations can be involved as co-ordinator:

- Public or private organisations active in the field of higher education or youth (non-formal education);
- Higher education institutions, associations or organisations of higher education institutions, as well as legally recognised national or international rector, teacher or student organisations;

The organisation applies on behalf of all participating organisations involved in the project and must be legally established and located in an EU Member State or third country associated to the Programme.

What types of organisations are eligible to participate in the project?

Participating organisations may be established either in an EU Member State or third country associated to the Programme or in an eligible third country not associated to the programme. Each project proposal may only involve organisations and participants from one of the eligible regions of third countries not associated to the Programme. The eligible regions covered by this action are Regions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 9 (see section "Eligible countries" in part A of this Guide).

Participating organisations may fall under the following categories:

- youth organisations[4] ;
- higher education institutions, associations or organisations of higher education institutions, as well as legally recognised national or international rector, teacher or student organisations;
- vectors of change in the education system (university managers, international departments, deans, quality agencies, etc.); public or private organisations active in the fields of higher education or youth and established in an EU Member State or third country associated to the Programme or in one of the eligible third countries not associated to the Programme.

Other entities may participate in other consortium roles, such as associated partners, subcontractors, third parties giving in-kind contributions, etc. Affiliated entities are not eligible for funding.

Number and profile of participating organisations

Proposals must be submitted by a consortium of at least 4 organisations (beneficiaries; not affiliated entities). Consortia must meet the following conditions:

- A minimum of 2 higher education institutions or youth organisations from 2 EU Member States and third countries associated to the Programme and 2 higher education institutions or youth organisations from 2 eligible third countries not associated to the Programme belonging to the same region (except in the case of projects with Russia, which will only contain Russia as a third country not associated to the programme); and
- The number of organisations from EU Member States and third countries associated to the Programme may not be higher than the number of organisations from third countries not associated to the Programme.
- In the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, applicants are encouraged to involve participants from a wide range of countries in their proposal, including least developed countries5   and/or partners that have less experience in Erasmus+.

Venue of the activities

The activities must take place in the countries of the organisations participating in them.

Duration of the project

Virtual Exchanges in Higher Education and Youth projects last 3 years.

Where to apply?

To the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA).

Call ID: ERASMUS-EDU-2022-VIRT-EXCH

When to apply?

Applicants have to submit their grant application by 20 September at 17:00:00 (Brussels time).

Applicant organisations will be assessed against the relevant exclusion and selection criteria. For more information please consult Part C of this Guide.

Expected impact

The activities and outputs of the different projects will aim at reaching a positive impact in relation to the objectives of the call that, while varying in accordance with the projects' specificities, should be closely connected to the learning dimension of the virtual exchanges. Each project proposal, as part of the logical framework included in the application form, should include information on this expected impact. Applicants are encouraged to foresee feedback from participating individuals and organisations, particularly as for the learning value, when reporting about the projects' impact.

Award criteria

Relevance of the project - (maximum score 30 points)

- The application is relevant to the chosen general and specific objectives of the call. The project proposal is consistent with the requirements of the call. The proposal is clearly explained.
- Consistency: The different components of the application are coherent and consistent. The application is based on an adequate analysis of challenges and needs; the objectives are realistic and address issues relevant to participating organisations and the direct and indirect target groups. Evidence of the effectiveness of the proposed virtual exchange approach is provided.
- Scaling up: The application demonstrates the potential for scaling up its practice(s) at different levels (e.g. local, regional, national, EU) and its transferability to different sectors. The scaling up is likely to generate impact not only at the level of the different partner organisations but also at system and/or policy level. The proposal has the potential to develop mutual trust and enhance cross-border cooperation.
- European added value: The application brings added value at EU level, through results that would not be achieved at country level alone, and there is potential for transferring results to countries not involved in the project. The project outcomes have the potential to feed into relevant EU policy agendas.

Quality of the project design and implementation - (maximum score 20 points)

- Strategic plan: The application establishes a clear strategy building on a feasibility analysis and identifies the necessary activities for testing, adapting, and/or scaling up the virtual exchange practice(s) in the new context of the project partnership.
- Needs: The different needs of the different partners have been identified and are well taken into account. A clear concept of how these different needs will be managed has been developed. The pedagogical approach(es) chosen are also in keeping with these different needs.
- Structure: The work programme is clear and intelligible and covers all project phases. Indicators of achievement and means of verification have been clearly defined for each outcome.
- Management: The project management plan is sound, with adequate resources allocated to the different tasks. Effective cooperation and decision-making processes have been put in place, that are comprehensible for all stakeholders. The budget shows cost effectiveness and value for money. There is coherence between tasks, roles and financial resources allocated to partners. The financial management arrangements are clear and appropriate.
- Evaluation: Specific measures for monitoring processes and deliverables (i.e. Indicators of achievement and means of verification) ensure that the project implementation is of high quality. Learning outcomes are evaluated and recognised. There is a clear quality assurance plan which also covers project management adequately. The monitoring strategy includes risk identification and a mitigating action plan. These elements are also included & detailed in the logical framework (obligatory template of the Call).

Quality of the partnership and the cooperation arrangements - (maximum score 20 points)

- Configuration: The partnership is capable of ensuring full achievement of the project's objectives. The consortium has all the necessary skills, expertise and experience in the areas covered by the project. Adequate allocation of time and input among the partners is ensured. Skills and competences of the partnership are complementary.

- Commitment: Each participating organisation demonstrates full involvement corresponding to its capacities and specific area of expertise.
- Cooperation: The cooperation arrangements are balanced. Effective mechanisms are proposed to ensure coordination, decision-making and communication between the participating organisations, stakeholders and any other relevant party.

Impact - (maximum score 30 points)

- Dissemination: A clear awareness raising, dissemination and communication strategy ensures reaching the relevant target groups, as well as the general stakeholders and the public during the lifetime of the project. This strategy includes plans for making any produced materials accessible through open licenses.
- Exploitation: The application demonstrates that the selected virtual exchange approach(es) can be successfully disseminated and/or scaled up, that it creates a wider impact and influences systemic change. The exploitation approach is clearly described and the proposed measures to exploit the project results are potentially effective.
- Impact: The foreseeable impact, notably for the identified target groups is clearly defined and measures are in place to ensure that the impact can be achieved and evaluated. Learning outcomes are clearly defined before each virtual exchange activity and measured after each activity, progress recorded and achievements recognised. The results of the activities are likely to be significant. The project outcomes have the potential to support long-term changes, improvements, or developments for the benefit of the target groups and systems concerned. The application also explains how the impact of learning (learning outcomes) through virtual exchange will be evaluated in order to make (data) informed recommendations to improve virtual exchange teaching & learning beyond the project. These elements are also included & detailed in the logical framework (obligatory template of the Call)
- Sustainability: The application includes appropriate measures and resources to ensure that the results and benefits can be sustained beyond the project lifetime.

To be considered for funding, proposals must score at least 60 points. Furthermore, they must score at least half of the maximum score points in each of the categories of award criteria mentioned above (i.e. minimum 15 points for the categories "relevance of the project" and "impact"; 10 points for the categories "quality of the partnership and the cooperation arrangements" and "quality of the project design and implementation").

In case of ex aequo, priority will be given to projects scoring highest under the criterion "relevance of the project" and then "impact".

Geographical targets

The EU's external action instruments are contributing to this action. The budget available is divided between different regions and the size of each budgetary envelope is different. Further information on the amounts available under each budgetary envelope will be published on the Funding and Tender Opportunities Portal (FTOP).

The geographical targets set for this action are the following:

- Sub-Sahara Africa: Priority will be given to least developed countries; a special emphasis shall also be put on migration priority countries; no country will access more than 8% of funding foreseen for the Region.

As a general rule, and within the limits of existing national and European legal frameworks, results

should be made available as open educational resources (OER) as well as on relevant professional, sectorial or competent authorities' platforms. The proposal will describe how data, materials, documents and audio-visual and social media activity produced will be made freely available and promoted through open licences, and does not contain disproportionate limitations.

What are the funding rules?

This action follows a lump sum funding model. The amount of the single lump sum contribution will be determined for each grant based on the estimated budget of the action proposed by the applicant. The granting authority will fix the lump sum of each grant based on the proposal, evaluation result, funding rates and the maximum grant amount set in the call.

The EU grant per project will be of a **maximum of 500,000 €, with EUR 200 as maximum investment per participant (i.e. a project of 500,000 € would have to reach at least 2,500 participants**). The grant awarded may be lower than the amount requested.

How is the project lump sum determined?

Applicants must fill in a detailed budget table in the application form, taking into account the following points:

1. The budget should be detailed as necessary by beneficiary/-ies and organized in coherent work packages (for example divided into 'project management', 'training', 'organization of events', 'mobility preparation and implementation', 'communication and dissemination', 'quality assurance', etc.);
2. The proposal must describe the activities covered by each work package;
3. Applicants must provide in their proposal a breakdown of the estimated costs showing the share per work package (and, within each work package, the share assigned to each beneficiary and affiliated entity);
4. Costs described can cover staff costs, travel and subsistence costs, equipment costs and subcontracting as well as other costs (such us dissemination of information, publishing or translation).

Proposals will be evaluated according to the standard evaluation procedures with the help of internal and/or external experts. The experts will assess the quality of the proposals, against the requirements defined in the call and the expected impact, quality and efficiency of the action.

Following the proposal evaluation, the authorising officer will establish the amount of the lump sum, taking into account the findings of the assessment carried out. The lump sum value will be limited to a maximum of 95% of the estimated budget determined after evaluation.

The grant parameters (maximum grant amount, funding rate, total eligible costs, etc.) will be fixed in the Grant Agreement. The project achievements will be evaluated on the outcomes completed. The funding scheme would allow putting focus on the outputs rather than the inputs, thereby placing emphasis on the quality and level of achievement of measurable objectives.

More details are described in the model Grant Agreement available in the Funding and Tender Opportunities Portal (FTOP).

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1 Soft skills include the ability to think critically, be curious and creative, to take initiative, to solve problems and

work collaboratively, to be able to communicate efficiently in a multicultural and interdisciplinary environment, to be able to adapt to context and to cope with stress and uncertainty. These skills are part of the key competences, as outlined in the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (OJ C 189/1 of 4.6.2018).

2 Youth workers are professional or volunteers involved in non-formal learning who support young people in their personal socio-educational and professional development.

3 https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-topic/data-protection/eu-data-protection-rules_en.

4 I.e. any organisation, public or private, working with or for young people outside formal settings. Such organisations can be, for example: a non-profit organisation, association, NGO (including European Youth NGOs); a national Youth Council; a public authority at local, regional or national level; an education or research institution; or a foundation.

5 As per the OECD Development Assistance Committee list of Least Developed Countries: DAC-List-ODA-Recipients-for-reporting-2021-flows.pdf (oecd.org).