

Statement of the User Advisory Board of the National Agency Education for Europe at BIBB

Problem situation

Five to six years ago, the European Commission decided to strive for a new architecture of databases with the aim of merging them all into a single large tool. So far, this project must be considered a failure. The reasons are manifold. The members of the Erasmus+ User Advisory Board have been told for some time by various users about their concerns and hardships with the Beneficiary Tool. They therefore met online on 27.04.2023 and discussed the acute problems. This resulted in the following statement.

1st concern: Improvement and redesign of the Beneficiary Module

The central concern is that the Beneficiary Module (BM) finally functions properly and is usable. In project work, the BM is the project executing organisation's most important working tool for calculating participants' budgets, recording the final report and extending durations. However, the tool has not proven reliable since its introduction: Many work steps had to be repeated several times because the database was offline, it did not work or generated incorrect information. The lack of reliability as well as the resulting increased workload to process mobilities and projects over such a long period of time and without any significant improvement or change of the tool and its reliability are no longer acceptable for project holders. While one could get the impression that the functionality of the database had improved, a few days later one could soberly conclude that this is not the case, because the errors are accumulating. Currently, it seems to be the organisational flat rates and no gender can be assigned when entering the participants. Sometimes the participant reports are only sent in English, reports for KA2 projects had to be created in a Word document as in previous years. Ultimately, however, the multitude of problems cannot be assigned to a single functionality. Rather, they extend across the entire application.

To date, the tool does not fulfil the promised functions, such as linking the Europass and the individual learning agreements. These tasks, which have to be done manually, take up an enormous amount of time. More than 50% of Erasmus+ project holders in Germany are vocational school teachers and do this work in addition to their 'real' tasks. They do not have an administrator at their disposal. Therefore, hints to enter the data into the database at a later stage are not very helpful. This is used throughout Europe, and the problems outlined occur in all countries.

But the work of the National Agency Education for Europe at the BIBB (NA) is also faltering due to the many requests from the project organisers. This is not only the case in Germany. In the Eastern European National Agencies, a high turnover of staff seems to have arisen for these reasons. The National Agencies find themselves in a "buffer zone" situation, as in addition to the increased workload due to the BT, the number of applications has increased by up to two thirds.

Technical problems with the database during project implementation were compounded by functional problems during the application process in the **Application Tool**. The text entries

were only partially saved, many European project promoters tried to transfer their applications into the database until late at night.

These serious barriers to work push project holders to the limits of their capacity. Smaller organisations with less staff resources or new applicants could be deterred from implementing Erasmus+ projects. As a result, the Erasmus+ programme loses its charm of simple manageability compared to, for example, the bureaucratically much more complex ESF funding lines.

It seems that the European Commission is failing in its own technical demands. This means that people who are critical of the Commission anyway can confirm precisely this argument that is often put forward.

There is a danger that Erasmus+ will fail because of its own success.

If Europe wants to maintain a special role in (vocational) education and training, secure skilled workers and play a good role in the competition for the best talents, the smooth running of the programme is indispensable. For this, the committed project holders need a functioning IT infrastructure in order to keep the administrative burden reasonable and to be able to concentrate on the essentials: accompanying young people and adults on their educational path and developing innovative teaching and learning concepts. Work that is essential to strengthen and advance European education systems!

2. concern: description inclusion

Another concern is the inclusion of participants, which can be applied for in the BT. This can be used to shorten the stay to up to two days. Since the definition of inclusion is also kept vague by the NA, clear criteria are needed here.

The User Advisory Board suggests that a pedagogical expert on the side of the project executing organisation informally confirms that the participant fulfils the criteria for the promotion of inclusion. An Excel list or similar could be created for this purpose, with a drop-down function to support the project organisers in their daily work.

Requirements

The new Erasmus+ programme sequence has been in existence for two years now and the Beneficiary Tool still does not function adequately. In order to systematically address and remedy this shortcoming, the User Advisory Board would like to see a thorough evaluation of the tool. Should the evaluation show an unsatisfactory result, the User Advisory Board believes that it would be unavoidable to programme a new database.

In addition, the User Advisory Board demands that the gaps in project implementation caused by the deficiencies (missing participant reports, missing birth data, etc.) should not be to the detriment of the project promoters.

Proposed solution

It is extremely important that the database functions properly as a working tool in a timely manner. The User Advisory Board also considered reactivating the "Mobility Tool" in the short term. It works flawlessly and the handling is known to many project holders.

Working with the programme must become easier!

We project holders stand for the idea of democracy, peace and cooperation on the continent through our work itself. Social cohesion in Europe is at risk and is becoming more fragile due to war and crises. What we can do is to build in a double bottom of understanding, encounter, learning from each other, acquiring knowledge and comprehension, so that prejudices, stereotypes, mistrust etc. can be countered as early as possible - even when conflicts take their course at the political level. This is invaluable and all too often not adequately appreciated. With an initiative we can also draw attention to this.

If the failure continues, it will not be long before the programme is called into question by the political side and funds are diverted. This danger must be seen in time and prevented!

On behalf of the User Advisory Board

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